

TOTAL PLAY!

EXPLORING PARTICIPATION AND PLAY

IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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## Abstract

This thesis connects the concepts of participation and play in higher education (HE), both of which are familiar themes in education literature. The former is typically seen as a 'problem' to be solved (i.e. widening participation), and the latter as a potential 'solution' (i.e. games-based learning). I challenge this conception by arguing that the logic of problems and solutions is a symptom of a flawed neoliberal discourse that overlooks much of what happens in universities. Education is often treated as a game, and this metaphor can be developed further by asking how participants actually play it.

To do this, I conceptualise play and participation as situated social processes that must be understood in qualitative terms rather than on the basis of impact or results. Using a novel model of the 'magic circle' drawn from Huizinga (1949) and Lave and Wenger (1991), and a playful pragmatist methodology influenced by Dewey (1929), I explore the question of how play and participation can influence each other to transform HE.

My research data comes from my work with a typical 'widening participation' cohort on a foundation degree in Education Studies. Twelve students took part in ten group interviews on the topics of play and educational participation, and I engaged in critical reflective teaching and research practice as I designed playful learning activities for a cohort of eighty students, producing field notes from observations and a reflective teaching journal. Critical thematic and autoethnographic analysis of data suggests that the way in which students and educators respond to the 'rules of the game' affects their participation.

This thesis makes a contribution to theory through my use of ideas drawn from play (the magic circle, playstyles, Total Play) in the philosophy of HE. It also contributes practically; I argue that play is useful not because it improves results, but because it unlocks new ways of experiencing and thinking about HE. My key conclusion is that if HE really is a game that we all play, we should also play *with* it.

For Mum and Dad, who wisely started this whole thing by buying me a Super Nintendo and sending me to a comprehensive school.

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## List of abbreviations

BERA	British Education Research Association
<i>BotW</i>	<i>Breath of the Wild</i>
CDA	critical discourse analysis
<i>D&amp;D</i>	<i>Dungeons and Dragons</i>
DBR	design-based research
DM	dungeon-master
FoAP	Foundations of Academic Practice
HE	higher education
HEFCE	Higher Education Funding Council England
HERA	Higher Education Research Act
HESA	Higher Education Statistics Agency
LPN	low-participation neighbourhood
MMORPG	mass-multiplayer online role-playing game
MMU	Manchester Metropolitan University
OFFA	Office for Fair Access
OfS	Office for Students
RPG	role-playing game
SNES	Super Nintendo Entertainment System
WP	widening participation

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All images created or captured by the author except for:

- 1A – 'Nintendo Announces SNES Classic Edition, Launches in September' by BagoGames (<https://www.flickr.com/photos/bagogames/35166702180>).
- 5A – 'The Official *Metal Gear* Timeline' by Kotaku (<https://kotaku.com/the-official-metal-gear-timeline-1725012293>).

# 1 – Introduction

## 1.1 Introduction

There are many ways to participate in an activity. You can immerse yourself fully and with enthusiasm, or stay near the edges, looking for any excuse to disengage. You can participate positively, encouraging others and nurturing the development of the activity, or negatively, undermining the activity or ruining it for other people. You can participate sincerely or ironically, conditionally or wholeheartedly, seriously or flippantly. It seems as if the word ‘participation’ needs to be attached to an adjective in order to fully describe what is going on in any particular case.

Participation in education is no different, but a glance at the word as it is used in the field of education might not suggest this conceptual richness. School policy refers to the ‘participation age’, at which young people have to attend school, and universities are driven by an agenda of ‘widening participation’ in higher education (HE) which initially seems only concerned with numbers. Most recently, the 2017 Higher Education and Research Act (HERA) requires institutions to have ‘participation plans’ that connect their ability to charge fees to a commitment to equality of opportunity, measured in terms of the participation rates of underrepresented groups. These kinds of approaches are largely about the big picture of which groups of individuals are participating, and how far these mirror the make-up of society at large. Equality of opportunity, in this case, is reducible to the question of whether individuals are equally able to attend university and leave with valued qualifications.

HERA’s commitment to institutional autonomy means that many decisions about how this is achieved are left to individual universities, but even at this local level there is a limited exploration of what participation might involve. My own institution’s current

education strategy document contains only one entry using the word 'participation', and it is in the section on widening participation:

### 2.5.3 Widening Participation for All

Universities serve as engines for social mobility not just for their own student body, but also for their wider community. We recognise a responsibility and mission to promote Higher Education for all, to support access to University to those within our community and to ensure that appropriate support and frameworks are in place to maximise success. We will continue to take an expansive approach to Widening Participation, supporting and assisting underrepresented communities in their admission to a range of universities. (MMU, 2017: 17)

Even here, participation is not a pedagogical process but a policy one. Frameworks and support are put in place, but participation is framed in terms of input ('admission') and output ('success'). There is little idea of what is going on in the middle, and though the education strategy contains pedagogical principles elsewhere these are not necessarily linked directly to the idea of participation.

Participation in this sense, can be superficially understood as just turning up. Yet at the same time in public discourse there is acknowledgement that there must be something more to participation than this. Right-wing pundits scoff at 'participation trophies' that reward 'just turning up', and on the left we bemoan political participation that is reduced to casting a vote every five years and nothing more. These hints at what participation *really* is are subtle, so they are rarely addressed head-on. Even in the driest of policies there are tacit assumptions about what sort of participation is being talked about; it is not that these documents are value-neutral, but rather that values are taken for granted.

Like much of what universities do at this level, participation can feel like a game in which an institution gets points for its ability to tick boxes, which might give us an excuse not to think too much about it. Games are there to be played and won, so the best thing to do is to find a winning strategy and stick to it for as long as it works. But of course, play is

another activity in which to participate, and there might well be many ways to play this game. Raising this metaphor only complicates the issue. How are participation and play connected in HE?

## **1.2 My participation in games and education**

My participation in formal education began in September 1990, a few days before my fifth birthday. Since then, I have never stopped participating in education. School, university, teacher-training; even after I quit teaching I worked for an education charity. For the past three years I've been back at university working on this thesis, giving my family further ammunition for the running joke that I cannot function in the real world.

1990 was an important year because it also saw the release of the Super Nintendo (SNES) console, and although I would not own one of these until Christmas 1992, this was my first videogames console. Videogames quickly became an obsession. Just like education, games have been there for as long as I can remember. My 'official' literacy, numeracy and subject-knowledge developed in parallel with my participation in games and play, even if they rarely crossed over with each other.

My personal connection between education and games goes beyond timing, though. I can see many of the ways in which games influenced my relationship with education. My favourite SNES game was *Super Metroid* (Nintendo, 1994), in which the bounty hunter Samus Aran explores an alien planet in search of the space pirate Ridley. 'Explores' is the operative word here; *Super Metroid* is one of the originators of the 'Metroidvania' genre of games which present a non-linear environment to the player. These environments contain barriers and challenges that appear impassable at first, but which can be overcome once the player character (and the player themselves) has developed new skills. Thus, what initially appears to be an obstacle becomes a door to further exploration. Although exploration is the route to a 'victory', there is often more to



Figure 1A: Super Metroid's title screen

explore beyond what is necessary to win the game, and this happens at the players' own pace. Hidden doors, secret treasures and unofficial shortcuts define the way in which the player interacts with the world.

*Super Metroid* also sticks with me because it terrified me. The planet Zebes drips with alien slime that is remarkably hideous considering it is rendered with 16-bit graphics. Hearing the soundtrack alone is enough to evoke memories of terror even now. The most affecting aspect, though, is the way in which the game crept into the real world. My copy of the game came with an official guidebook that outlined strategies and secret areas, but this was not enough, so I began to draw my own maps, methodically keeping track of my progress on graph paper borrowed from my father. In amongst old school exercise books, I still have these hand-drawn maps, which have doodles and scrawled notes all over them (and which look extraordinarily like my research notes for this project considering they are twenty-five years old). At an even more physical level, the game affected my reality too. The ancient Philips television on which I played had mechanical buttons which would loudly pop out and fly across my bedroom if I was not careful when turning the console on. Thus,

the game announced to the rest of the house that it was being played, especially if I was supposed to be doing my homework instead. The game refused to be confined to the space that it belonged in.

These sorts of stories are common, to the extent that many people in their early thirties have stories about videogames from the early 1990s. Games (and stories about games) have become something of a shared language with friends, and even provided touchstones for making new friends in new contexts. Thus, my becoming an undergraduate student seemed to be just as much about sitting with a group of friends playing *Shadow of the Colossus* (Sony Computer Entertainment/Team Ico, 2006) and *We Love Katamari* (Namco, 2005) in the early hours of morning as it was working through reading lists and writing essays. Playing allowed us to explore together.

My personal history contains themes that will be central to this thesis. The first is the ubiquity of games in my life. I may have never really left education, but I have also never really stopped playing. Thus, learning and play are parallel processes for me, and I have tended to make connections (such as viewing exploration as learning) between them because of this. On top of this, play was a social process, even when I played ‘single-player’ games. It provided me with a cultural experience that could be shared with others outside the game, and highlighted the social aspects of educational activities that I might otherwise have understood only in terms of my own actions.

The most vital theme is that the games I played tended not to stay confined to play spaces. They leaked into discussion with others, or they interfered with other activities. It is common to dismiss games as a distraction from reality, and I have certainly treated them in this way, but this dismissal comes with an assumption that ‘distraction’ is unnecessary or harmful. The sheer ubiquity of games in my life meant they have always been in the same category as reading a book, or watching a film, or going for a walk. Because of this,



the idea that games and ‘the real world’ are entirely different things never struck me as particularly accurate, because they have always been embedded in the real world.

### **1.3 The research question**

This thesis takes as its starting point that there is already a conversation happening between the worlds of games and education (Gee, 2007; Whitton, 2014) and this might be as good a place as any to bring in the topic of participation. As my literature review will reveal, there is no shortage of writing on the connections between the two, especially given the growth of technological solutions to educational problems since the turn of the twenty-first century, and the simultaneous growth of both videogames and tabletop games as mass-market cultural products. This growth has seen scholarship around education and games overlap more and more, often from the perspective of games designers who work in education settings. Whilst I come from a more traditional education background, I certainly see this thesis as a contribution to the wider conversation happening on the border between these two disciplines.

In order to develop my argument, in 2017-18 I worked as an Associate Lecturer at Manchester Metropolitan University (MMU) and drew upon my experiences as I analysed the specific concepts of play and participation. The opening section of this chapter should reveal the roots of my interest in play. In the case of participation it is a little more complicated. My interest stems from my past working in widening participation programmes (and being a beneficiary of these sorts of programmes as an undergraduate). I am dedicated to the issue of social justice in universities. On top of this, my research led to me working with MMU’s foundation year which is explicitly intended as a new approach to widening participation (MMU, 2017: 23), and which attracts a diverse cohort of students because of this. The structure of this course, and its position as something of an experimental programme, also enabled me to take a more innovative approach to my own

practice which again put me into contact with concepts like participation and engagement as I began to consider the impact of my teaching. I go into more detail on the foundation year cohort, and the logistics of my teaching work, in Chapter 5; further discussion of the distinction between participation and other concepts is in Chapter 2. For now, it is enough to say that I eventually settled on participation because it enabled me to think more about the people involved in the process of education, especially when I moved beyond the limitations of a narrower understanding of 'widening participation'. At the heart of my argument is a commitment to the idea that both education and games are not abstract, independent things that exist beyond the 'real world'. I am interested in the ways in which these activities interact with each other, and the world beyond them, when people participate in them.

Following this line of thought, my initial central research question is 'How are play and participation connected in higher education?', which succinctly points out my core concepts and the context in which I worked. Unpacking this, there are a number of ways of addressing this question, some of which will play more into the thesis than others:

- I have already begun to consider the meanings of words, and this points to the idea that this could be both a theoretical and practical question. There is a difference between understanding what the concepts of play and participation have in common with each other, and examining how they are actually used in the university. In education, the line between theory and practice is blurred but it is worth considering where the argument starts at least. Whilst much of the thesis is practical, I find myself returning to theoretical and definitional issues in order to find new ways of considering practical problems.
- Even given a specific context, there is still a question of whose perspective we are taking when we ask this question. There are many ways to participate, and

participation and play for a student might look very different from participation and play for an educator. I draw upon on both of these perspectives (and others) in the thesis, and try to identify commonalities and differences in order to build a more comprehensive answer to the question. In particular, I interrogate my own perspective as an educator with a background in games, and consider the extent to which my personal history can translate into wider educational discussions.

- As with many questions surrounding education, there is also something of an ‘is/ought’ division here that hinges on whether the connection between play and participation being discussed is actual or potential. Much of my thesis looks at play and participation as experienced, so fits more with the former; however, towards the end of the argument I begin to address the question of how play and participation *should* and *could* be connected.

Considering these issues leads to a number of sub-questions from my central question, which define not just which aspects of the question this thesis will address but also which ones it will not:

How are play and participation connected in higher education?

- RQ1: How does play help us to understand student participation?
- RQ2: How does a playful approach transform teaching and research in higher education?
- RQ3: How might the idea of play transform our philosophical approach to education?

#### **1.4 My contribution to the field**

At the simplest level, answering these questions contributes to the field of education research because it contributes to wider discussion around the topics of participation and play. These concepts have not commonly been combined by researchers and, as my literature review will reveal, there is something to be said for viewing them together rather

than as separate topics. In drawing them together, I am better able to focus on the ways in which both are situated, social activities that constitute learning.

More substantive contributions come from this act of combining topics. At a practical level, my thesis is a demonstration of how designing pedagogy to encourage and develop these activities might work, and how it differs from 'conventional' ways of doing things. My case study chapter (Chapter 5) makes my actions clear, and I spend much of the rest of the thesis reflecting on the consequences of this intervention. Many of my conclusions hint towards ideas of how play and participation should be connected in future pedagogy, especially from the point of view of educational practitioners.

However, in developing a critical understanding of play and participation I also develop some scepticism over the idea of educational intervention, and in examining the topic from students' perspective I focus more on the reality of play and participation than their potential. This, again, is a contribution in that it challenges some of the more technical approaches to the topics that precede this one, and considers how play and participation actually happen regardless of the intent of any interventions designed. This suggests a more theoretical contribution; by examining play and participation at a conceptual level and developing new ways of thinking about them in the context of HE, I add to a wider epistemological and moral discussion of the nature and value of knowledge, and also consider new ways of conceptualising play in particular that places my study more in line with philosophy of education than education research.

Having said this, my theoretical contribution also links back to a further practical one, in that the thesis becomes a reflection on the act of researching education. In actively defining knowledge in my methodology chapter (Chapter 4), I outline the reasoning behind the particularly playful form of Deweyan pragmatism that justifies my approach to research. The reflective, critical turn that this research takes acts as another potential example to follow in education research; whilst my results may be linked to the context,

my methods may inspire similar studies in other contexts. This is, potentially, not only a contribution to the field of education studies, but also the field of play and game studies in that my approach to participation could work in non-educational settings. The relationship between the concepts works both ways, and studies of games can learn from studies of educational participation.

The biggest limitation of this thesis stems from its strengths in that it is deeply rooted in a particular context, even to the extent that it is the product of this individual researcher. I hope it is clear from my introduction so far that this is topic is a personal one, and the approach I take to this research is reflexive and personal because of this. As I am researching my own practice, and my own interests, it is difficult not to centre myself in the process, though I hope my critical approach means that I remain aware of how this translates into my results. I am keen not to be too self-indulgent (or at least, no more self-indulgent than any other scholar dedicating three years of their life to a PhD project).

This means that, even where it has practical implications, this thesis cannot be an instruction manual on how to connect play and participation across the board, but can only offer suggestions of how they *might* be connected. My findings are still uncertain, and, as I will discuss later, act more as provocations to continue a conversation about these topics rather than a definitive answer. On top of this, as much as my approach to research might inspire further studies, it is not a replicable experiment because of its dependence on so many contextual factors.

I am not on a quest for objective truth, but rather a subjective, situated understanding of the issues I encounter. This also means that I foreground some of the more political aspects of my thesis, meaning it comes from an overt 'non-neutral' standpoint. The methodology chapter will interrogate and justify some of the value choices I have made around this. Given the impossibility of objective truth implied by my

epistemology, it is vital to be more aware and more critical of the extent to which one's existing viewpoint contributes to developing ideas.

### **1.5 Thesis overview**

My argument begins with three chapters that position the thesis in relation to existing literature. My theoretical contribution begins in Chapter 2 which summarises the review of literature I undertook at the start of the research process. It was important to develop an understanding of the field in order to ground myself, so I examine existing studies of games in education and of the idea of university participation and try to position them within a wider context of the twenty-first century university. This inevitably raises the issue of neoliberalism, which I address from the perspective of both games and education, and which provides a frame through which I further engage with literature. The chapter becomes the first step of a critical journey as I interrogate existing literature which deals with play and participation at a more conceptual level. Eventually, I settle on working definitions of play and participation that foreground their situated, social and critical aspects. The rest of the study stems from this formulation, so literature provides not just a justification for research but the first step in the process.

Chapter 3 takes a different approach to the literature as I develop the conceptual model through which I interpret and analyse my data. I draw together the ideas of the magic circle (Huizinga, 1949) and legitimate peripheral participation (Lave and Wenger, 1991) in order to construct a 'magic circle of participation' that can be used to understand both play and participation in a university context. Continuing a theme of the thesis, this draws together two existing models that have not been considered together before, and captures the commonalities between participation and play. The model considers: the 'rules of the game' in a given context and how individuals respond to these; the extent of the 'circle' in which they and others participate; how this circle overlaps with other contexts

in which they participate; and the sense of 'magic' in this circle (i.e. the inexplicable or special things that occur). These four aspects, taken together, provide a running theme for analysis in the second half of the thesis.

Chapter 4 has two roles in continuing the research process. Firstly, it is an opportunity for me to outline the epistemology I use throughout the thesis, which is rooted in Deweyan pragmatism. This philosophy has existing, obvious links to the field of education research, and I spend some time examining these. I also connect pragmatism to my conception of play, partly to further tie play and educational participation together, and partly to reclaim pragmatism from the sense of seriousness that its name suggests. Secondly, I outline the implications of playful pragmatism for a research methodology which is intended to capture the experiences of play and participation for students and myself. This methodology is influenced by, and contains elements of, design-based research, ethnography, autoethnography and critical pedagogy, but also incorporates play as mode of experience in order to understand the research context. I also begin to consider the interpretation and analysis of data, discussing the reflexive ideas inherent in autoethnography, as well as thematic and critical discourse analysis which unlock the ways in which individuals operate within a wider neoliberal context. Pragmatism implies that meaning is conveyed through action, and I am interested in uncovering this meaning.

Chapter 5 acts as a short bridge between the first and second halves of the thesis by giving a more detailed outline of the foundation year and the work that I (and students) did. This is a largely descriptive chapter that provides the contextual 'backstory' for my findings, as I tell the story of the teaching and research activities that I undertook, and the foundation year course that provided the context for this. The chapter is, in effect, a practical case study on using playful teaching and research methods with undergraduates, but it can only be understood as a critical reading in light of the following chapters which go further in analysing the meaning and impact of these activities.

The first of these chapters (Chapter 6) examines participation from the point of view of students. Drawing upon data from focus groups and teaching observations, I borrow the existing idea of 'playstyles' (Bartle, 1996) from games studies in order to examine the different ways in which students interacted with each other and the 'rules of the game' within the context of the foundation year. I argue that there are many ways of participating in this context, which can challenge conventional notions of what 'counts' as participation. This is particularly the case when we consider all the different ways of not-participating too. Drawing upon situated learning theory, I posit that students' ability to shift playstyles is both evidence of learning and a form of learning in its own right, and is a valid response to the environment in which they find themselves. This has implications for the design of educational activities because it shifts the focus away from the intended result of activities and towards an understanding of how activities are actually interpreted by students, often in creative or subversive ways.

In Chapter 7 I turn the lens on myself by engaging in reflective autoethnographic analysis of my time working with these students. Drawing upon three 'vignettes' of reflective writing from across the year, I consider three different roles that I played (educator, researcher and player), and how these involved participation in different 'magic circles'. The story of the year, upon analysis, is one of shifting from trying to find the overlaps between these circles to actively creating overlaps, often by using play. I close the chapter by considering this through the lens of play, and challenging the notion that educators and researchers are best understood as 'designers' when they incorporate play into their practice. Instead, I offer alternative metaphors from play and games which might better describe the way in which I drew magic circles together around my practice.

In Chapter 8, I combine the idea of shifting playstyles from Chapter 6 and overlapping magic circles from Chapter 7 in order to build a more unified analysis of participation in higher education. Given all of the different ways in which my students and



I participated, is there a better way in which all of us could participate together? I draw upon the history of 'Total Football' in the Netherlands (Winner, 2000) to develop an idea of 'Total Play' as a mode of participation that empowers participants and transforms its context. I identify some 'green shoots' of this in my experiences of the year, but also limitations that prevented it from developing within this specific context. Given all of the metaphors of play that I (and others) use, I argue that, for Total Play to occur, we need to move beyond metaphorical understandings of play, and play 'for real' in the university. This chapter is the point at which I most explicitly and deliberately cross the 'is/ought' gap; many of these arguments defy the neoliberal model of education outlined in the literature review, and link back to arguments about the moral purpose of HE as much as they connect to my experiences.

My concluding chapter draws this analysis together by summarising some of the key ideas that connect play and participation to answer my research questions, but also tries to connect these questions (and answers) back to each other. This chapter also takes a leaf out of the book of many play scholars in that I present a utopian vision of my future practice in HE that embraces Total Play. Engaging in this process reiterates the contribution that this thesis makes to HE research and practice by examining existing ideas from the perspective of play.

### **1.6 A note on writing style: Dancing about architecture**

Like all PhDs, this project has shifted somewhat from its initial starting point, and in this case in particular, I have surprised myself with the extent to which it has become a personal, reflective piece of writing. The reasoning behind this will become clearer, especially once I have outlined my research methodology. For now, it is worth noting the impact that this approach has had on the way in which I have written the thesis. I am comfortable drawing upon literature as one is supposed to when engaging in academic

research, but I am also keen to use my own personal history with games I have played over the years. The metaphors that games provide for education research and practice will become a running theme throughout the thesis, and each chapter includes at least one unifying example from games which is intended to tie these experiences together and clarify how I see them. All of these games have meaning to me, and I hope that this meaning can be shared with readers through describing my experiences with them. Having said this, I am aware that the problem of writing about games is that it effectively uses one medium to refer to another ('dancing about architecture', as the old music journalism adage goes) which can make it difficult to capture the unique qualities of the experience in question. This is particularly difficult with games because, as Keogh (2018) has argued, playing videogames involves a particular embodied literacy which combines our experience of the game with our sense of the technology we use to interact with it. Where relevant, I have tried to describe games and play in ways that foreground my experiences as a player and highlight the particular aspect of each game that is relevant to the current point, rather than describing it more 'objectively'. However, I also try to give enough historical detail about each game that my descriptions make sense in a wider context. For any readers who are particularly interested in seeing things from my perspective, I have included a list of all the games I draw upon (which might be considered a 'ludography') alongside the reference list at the end of the thesis. Otherwise, I hope that my 'dancing about architecture' encourages some new ways of thinking about both writing and playing even if it is difficult to capture specific play experiences.

Writing about games and play is also complicated because they are vague, overlapping terms that are easily conflated. There are many questions about the scope of each term, especially given that it is a division that does not exist in other languages. There are disagreements over whether play is a psychological phenomenon or social activity, and there are debates over whether certain sports, hobbies, puzzles and artworks 'count' as

games. I will write in more detail about this language issue in my literature review, but given that I have already started writing about games it is worth pre-empting this. I will argue later that most conceptions of 'play' that try to capture the spontaneous, simple or childlike sense of play that exists outside of games are still bound by rules, so can be understood as 'gameplay' to some extent. At the same time, I am keen to keep an open mind on what 'counts' as play, and defer to language as used by those who see themselves as playing. I am not caught up too much in distinguishing or dividing the two from each other, but, in general, when I use the word 'play' I am referring to rule-bound, 'gameplay'-type activity, and when I use the word 'game' I am referring to these sets of rules and their context. I am aware that this division is vague, but will critique and refine it in the literature review.

### **1.7 Conclusion: It's a game**

Education, like many activities, is often discussed as if it is a game. In higher education, there seem to be winners and losers, and we use metaphors from games like league tables to rank and sort performance of both individual students and their universities. We evoke games in our discussions of higher education, talking of competition, and what is possible given the 'rules of the game' inherited from policy.

This thesis begins with this discussion as its starting point and takes it to its logical conclusion. If higher education really is a game, how are people playing it? And are there better ways to play? Raising these questions might seem flippant or light-hearted; after all, games are supposed to be fun. However, the metaphor of the game unlocks ways of thinking about educational participation as a process when viewed alongside all of the other activities that individuals participate in. Participation in any activity, including games, can be fun, but can also be incredibly serious depending on what participants are trying to

do. By considering alternative ways of both thinking about and participating in HE, I hope to change the game by playing it.

## 2 – Literature review: Participation and play in higher education

### 2.1 Introduction

My overarching research question concentrates on the relationship between play and participation in higher education (HE), and the sub-questions focus on specific facets of this relationship. Before examining these questions, though, it is worthwhile gaining a grounding in what each concept entails, and how they are connected at a theoretical level. In this chapter, I present participation and play as complementary concepts that can illuminate our understanding of students' experiences of HE. In order to do this, it is necessary to understand the legacy of these concepts in education more generally. With this in mind, I will frame participation (specifically widening participation) as an archetypal educational 'problem', and play (specifically play- and games-based learning) as an archetypal educational 'solution' (see Figure 2A). Whilst the use of the latter to 'solve' the former is uncommon, by framing the concepts in this way I highlight the way in which discussion of both is tied up the university as a neoliberal institution with instrumentalist goals.

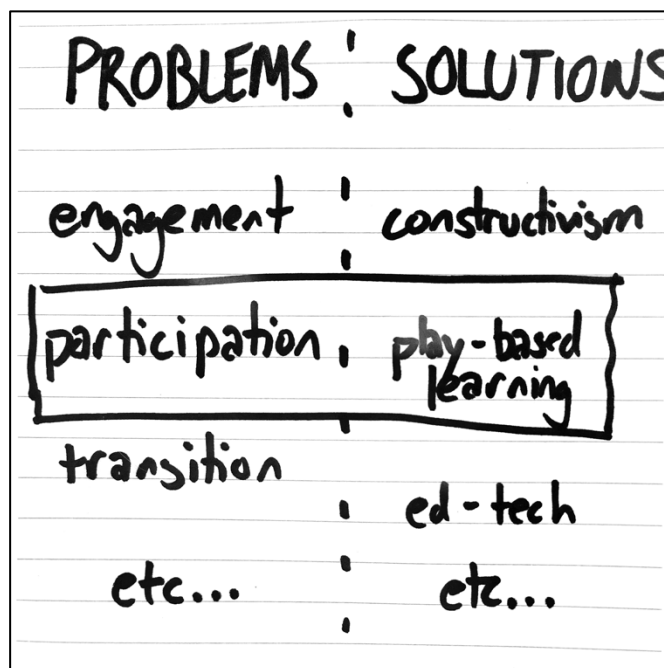


Figure 2A – Participation as a problem and play as a solution?

In response to this, I transform and expand definitions of both ‘participation’ and ‘play’ by tracing their use in education and play/games studies literature. In doing so, I move away from the discussion of both in terms of problems and solutions, and instead move towards exploring an understanding of participation and play as situated processes; ways to focus on what happens in the context of educational institutions rather than what goes into and comes out of them. Given these understandings, I return to re-examine participation and play together, establishing some central themes which will provide the focus of the remainder of the thesis.

## **2.2 A problem: Participation in higher education**

Participation as a concept comes up frequently in HE literature in works concerned with ‘widening participation’ (WP). This term refers to the broad set of policies, practices and research that surround the social composition of universities. In the context of HE in the UK, this is perceived as a problem in part because educational participation is not compulsory beyond the age of eighteen. In order to encourage participation in university, it is necessary to understand and steer the decisions that potential students make rather than just compel them to attend. This is particularly the case for those people who might not see university as the place for them. These individuals are generally placed under the ‘WP’ label, which can include: members of disadvantaged socio-economic groups and ethnicities; students with disabilities or additional needs; and mature students. Programmes like the foundation year on which I worked during this PhD are specifically designed to enable these groups of students to access HE. I discuss the specifics of this particular programme, and how they link to WP, further in Chapter 5.

The historical underrepresentation of particular groups in HE is acknowledged as a societal problem which requires the input of university, schools and government in order

to reach more equitable educational outcomes (Archer et al., 2003). Widening participation is often understood in terms of barriers to entry (Thomas, 2001); these can be structural (e.g. institutional culture and qualification systems) or individual (e.g. aspirations and finance), and are often seen as coming from the 'supply-side' (i.e. the students applying or not applying for universities) or 'demand-side' (i.e. the universities recruiting or failing to recruit students). Solutions, then, operate on the assumption that non-participants are a problem to be fixed, either by schools or by universities. The most common solution is for universities to work with schools in order to raise the aspirations of identified groups and encourage applications. More recently there has also been a drive to examine the retention and success rates of members of the groups targeted by these interventions once they have started attending university (Vignoles and Murray, 2016).

Under this conception, universities and students understand participation in overwhelmingly instrumental terms; HE is described in terms of its impact on the economy, and student participation is valued through the contribution of various sub-categories of student to this (Mavelli, 2014). This also works at a local level; in the UK university funding is partly dictated by the number of students enrolled. Most recently, government policy did not link WP with funding formally, but HE institutions had agreements with the Office for Fair Access (OFFA) that they would spend a proportion of raised student fees on 'access measures' designed to encourage participation from disadvantaged groups, including (for the first time) mature students (Higher Education Funding Council for England [HEFCE], 2015). This has been strengthened by the closure of OFFA and HEFCE and the subsuming of their functions into the new independent Office for Students (OfS) under the 2017 Higher Education and Research Act. Recent guidance from OfS requires any institution charging above the basic fees rate to have an 'access and participation plan' which needs to be approved (Office for Students, 2018). These plans are predicated on the continuous improvement of success and progress achieved by underrepresented groups, which needs

to be evidenced. The nature of this evidence is not specified, and although there are references to this taking place on an individual level and ‘throughout the student lifecycle’, it is clear that this evidence will continue to be composed largely of: a) numbers of underrepresented students attending; and b) completion and success rates for these students. For example, the latest OfS guidance frames participation in terms of ‘access’, encouraging institutions to be creative in their use of contextual data at the time when students apply for courses, and to consider students’ prior educational achievements within this context (Office for Students, 2019). Contextual information only comes into this process in as much as it justifies or explains the data. The idea that this context might affect students’ subsequent experiences *at* university is not considered so strongly, although institutions may think about them as far as they contribute to other measures like the National Student Survey. Even given this, there is a question of only measuring what can be measured (and what is already being measured).

Crucially, the emphasis on what stops non-participants from participating, rather than what encourages participants in the first place, means that WP research has often ignored what actually happens in the university. Given its centrality to the topic the ‘participation’ in ‘widening participation’ has been undertheorised, and is often understood as synonymous with ‘attendance’ and/or ‘success’. More critical approaches have begun to address the idea that participation goes beyond this, though. Burke (2012) frames WP in light of cultural capital in order to question whether existing programmes actually help the cause of social mobility for ‘non-traditional’ students, and concludes that it is better for universities to become more participatory, changing pedagogy to respond to a more diverse student population rather than merely expanding existing WP programmes. Similarly, Minter (2001) examines the power relationships between university lecturers and students, emphasising that the former define what counts as success for the latter to the extent that even well-intentioned WP is an exercise in transforming ‘non-traditional’



students into more 'traditional' ones. Walker (2008) uses the idea of human capabilities to question the 'type' of equality that WP aims for, demonstrating that current approaches undermine attempts to encourage students to participate on equal terms with each other because predominantly economic strategies 'hollow out' ideas from social justice

What these approaches have in common is an acknowledgement that there may be more to widening participation than policies that encompass the journey into university, and that have easily measurable outcomes. Widening participation needs to be treated as a pedagogical problem rather than an administrative one (McLellan et al., 2016), and pedagogy needs to address the different experiences and expectations that students bring with them to university, along with the assumptions about those students being made by lecturers. This necessarily involves understanding and challenging what actually happens in universities. Indeed Burke (2002; 2012) sees 'transforming participation' as a more vital task than 'widening', tying the WP agenda to some of the critical participatory pedagogies which I will examine later.

## **2.3 A solution?: Games- and play-based learning**

### **2.3.1 Games-based learning**

Games and play are used in education contexts because educators believe they will improve outcomes for students, especially through motivating and engaging students (Rich, 2015). Games have been used in education for a wide variety of purposes: from delivering content through virtual worlds (Barab et al., 2001); through providing a space for skill-development (Barr, 2018); to motivating changes in behaviour through the use of point-systems (Khan et al., 2017). This has involved the development of brand new games with educational purposes (Barab et al., 2010), or the adoption of existing (commercial) games which have been used in new ways to support learning (Nebel et al., 2016).

When used in this way games can be classified as ‘serious games’ (see Charsky, 2010; De Gloria et al., 2015). This term has its roots outside of education and describes games with a purpose beyond entertainment or leisure. A commonly related (often conflated) concept is ‘gamification’, which applies game mechanics and structures (i.e. elements of games rather than whole games) to non-game activities (Deterding et al., 2011). In education contexts the both of these terms are increasingly used interchangeably with ‘games for learning’ (Boyle et al., 2016: 186), and the distinction from ‘games for entertainment’ is taken as read.

If games are not being used to entertain, what is behind their use in education? A meta-analysis of studies on the use of serious games in education illustrates that common purposes include affective/emotional change (often providing motivation to learn), and the acquisition of knowledge and skills (Connolly et al., 2012). A more recent update to this paper saw similar results, although a shift towards knowledge-acquisition lines up with an increase in the use of bespoke games designed by educators rather than ‘off-the-shelf’ games (Boyle et al., 2016). These more recent meta-analyses of research studies are supported by older, practice-based literature reviews from Mitchell and Savill-Smith (2004) and De Freitas (2006), which highlight the ways in which games have been used to motivate and engage learners, encourage the development of skills and provide a context for learning in unique environments.

Many of those researching and writing about game-based learning do two things: on one hand, they write practical guides to the use of games and play in education, often using examples; on the other, they examine play and games as concepts in order to better understand the role that they might play in solving educational problems in the future. Volumes edited by Salen (2008) and Whitton and Moseley (2012) include critical case studies which exemplify the use of particular games in the classroom as well as more theoretical pieces on the values behind the use of these games. Many of these authors are

influenced by Gee (2007), who highlights many of the ‘learning principles’ surrounding the use of games in all levels of education. Gee acknowledges the power of video games as cultural artefacts, and uses examples of ‘real’ video games outside of the classroom in order to demonstrate that they provide learning experiences that can be replicated in educational contexts. Gee also understands that the newer literacies around games that people have (or lack) are likely to have an effect on the way in which they learn, an idea that other authors sometimes miss, especially when they dismiss the entertainment factor in games.

### 2.3.2 Games and constructivism

Like many innovative approaches, game-based learning has its roots in a constructivist conception of education in which knowledge is socially constructed and the student learns through active participation in a social process which builds upon prior understandings and provides a motivation for learning (Bruner, 1977; Whitton, 2012). In fact, the earliest major proponents of constructivism, including Bruner (1977), Vygotsky (1967) and Piaget (1962) examined and explained childhood play and games in terms of their ability to simulate the real world. For example, for Vygotsky play fulfils the preschool child’s unrealisable desires through the use of imagination, and thus prepares the child for future situations in which they will not be able to control their surroundings. It is this line of thought that promotes the current use of games and play to create active, student-centred learning environments in which learners can use their existing understandings in new ways. This is often understood as being at odds with a ‘traditional’ behaviourist conception of education as knowledge-transfer.

The connection between constructivism and innovation is strengthened by the way in which literature on games-based learning is positioned within the scope of ‘Ed-Tech’ research. Between 2007 and 2017 the terms ‘game-based learning’ and ‘gamification’

appeared frequently as top keywords in educational technology journals (Bodily et al., 2019). Many contemporary works on game-based learning focus on digital games, though there are some that examine 'analogue' board and tabletop games in similar terms (Moseley and Whitton, 2014; Lean et al., 2018). Even in these cases, the focus is very much upon the ways in which games encourage active and collaborative learning for specific outcomes.

The focus on outcomes and effects that I have outlined extends in part from a particular understanding of digital games, which are understood in terms of their effects on individuals even outside of education. In their analysis of fifty-five papers written on commercial video-game engagement, Boyle and colleagues (2012) found that a large proportion examined the positive and negative psychological and emotional effects of games, and their impact on life satisfaction. Earlier studies, perhaps because the medium was newer, tended to focus on the negative aspects of games such as aggression and violence, whereas newer ones were more interested in positive outcomes. Importantly these papers were predominantly quantitative or quasi-experimental, or at least made claims to be scientific, which helps us to understand the sort of language of cause-and-effect which surrounds this type of research. Mitchell and Savill-Smith (2004) clearly evoke this discourse by beginning their analysis of educational games with a discussion of games' negative effects on young people's mood and health (p. 7-8) before outlining effects on academic performance. De Freitas (2006) is more dismissive of the negative impact of games, but nevertheless frames the effect that games have in terms of how they can be used to support what is already being done in classrooms, or deliver existing outcomes in more engaging ways. The literature that these reviews draw together is, like much of education literature, fundamentally focused on the measurable outcomes of the activities it describes, and the purpose of the literature is to describe and share replicable activities.

Whilst not writing directly about games, Selwyn (2010) critiques these kinds of approaches to the use of technology in education, arguing that a focus on 'means-end' relationships between technology and learning outcomes means that technology is rarely understood in terms of its wider context, and that this leads to disappointment when outcomes cannot be guaranteed. Selwyn's solution to this is a renewed focus on 'state-of-the-actual' rather than 'state-of-the-art' questions (p. 70), and thick description of what actually happens when technology is used in education settings. Halverson (2012) expands on this approach in the context of educational games, blaming the approach that social scientists have tended to take (i.e. treating games as a technology whose effects can be tested in existing contexts) for a lack of understanding of the way in which games can create and transform these contexts.

### 2.3.3 Play-based learning

Many of the works I have outlined emphasise games rather than play, perhaps because games offer such concrete (and potentially repeatable) educational examples, but they do include some consideration of play as a related concept. I will explore the direct link between play and games in more detail later, but for the time being it is worth considering where play has been used as an aspect of learning. Play-based learning intersects with game-based learning for adults in as much as games provide a space for play to occur, and because (as I will outline below) the words 'game' and 'play' are treated by some authors as synonyms.

Play-based learning as a concept in its own right is most often evoked in early childhood education. Play is seen as what young children do 'naturally' in their exploration of the world, without intervention from educators, and play-based learning becomes a process of trying to harness the power of these experiences (Smidt, 2011). It is less commonly recognised as a technique for older children and adults, possibly because

children's free play becomes more codified into games (particularly sport) as they develop towards adulthood (Scarlett et al., 2005). However, despite the more frivolous nature of play it can play a role in education for older children and adults through providing a space to practice in a safe way, promoting creativity and imagination and making learning fun (Whitton, 2014).

This comes across in some applied examples of play in informal adult learning. Kolb and Kolb (2010) examine what adults can learn through playing non-competitive team sports, and Thorsted (2016) uses a similar social approach to examine professional learning and how play and work overlap with each other. In both cases, play is encouraged by the social setting (i.e. a sports club or a 'playful' toy company), and has some resemblance to games, but these authors emphasise the free nature of the activities in question.

Given this emphasis on freedom, it would be easy to see play-based learning as something of an antithesis to the overly technical use of games in education. However, there is certainly a family resemblance between play-based and games-based learning, largely owing to the fact that they seem to share a common constructivist epistemology, and that the more recent renewed theoretical interest in play has its roots in video game design (see below). Others have challenged the notion that a playful approach automatically ensures a sense of autonomy. For example, Farné (2016) suggests that play is at odds with pedagogy, and that its use in even the early years classroom involves taming or sterilising some of the aspects of play which have real value.

#### 2.3.4 Games and play in HE

Many works focus on the use of games in school-based education, or education in general, but there is a small but growing literature which examines games- and play-based learning in HE specifically. Whilst the 'learning principles' that have been explored in the spirit of Gee are applicable across age groups and between formal and informal settings, it is

necessary to understand the specific needs and motivations of university students when it comes to games, especially as they are in a transitional state between childhood and adulthood in many cases (Whitton, 2010: 36-7).

Following a similar strategy to the meta-analyses outlined above, Lameris and colleagues (2017) present an overview of 165 papers on serious games in HE settings, finding that they are used for similar purposes of motivation and engagement, knowledge acquisition and skills development.

There are some differences between the use of games in HE and more generally, though, which largely come across in the link between games and the 'real world' beyond education. Herro and Clark (2016) highlight the power of games in encouraging partnership-work with external organisations and explicitly developing students' applied skills. Prensky (2001) argues that, because of adult students' different motivations, games need to be framed more in terms of employment or professional development. This is put into practice when games are applied to simulate working environments and situations that would otherwise be difficult for students to experience (Moizer et al., 2009). For example, Rooney and colleagues (2015) use simulation games with nursing students in order to allow them to practise without placing patients at risk, and Ayling (2012) examines the use of more playful teaching methods with social work students specifically around communicating with children and young people. This highlights that games and play are often framed in terms of employability for those careers where they are useful concepts. This even extends to the field of games design; working with games design students, Sheldon (2011) explicitly uses the structure of mass-multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPGs), including concepts like experience points, bosses and guilds, all of which would be familiar to players and which would be expected elements of the games that students might develop in the future.

It could be argued that, because of aspects like this, games in HE occupy the more 'serious' end of 'serious games'. This reflects the notion that students are perceived to be more focused on their studies and do not 'need' the incentives that games are seen as providing (see Whitton, 2010: 36). Outside of subject boundaries, games and gamification encourage and reward specific behaviours. Examples of this include games used to encourage attendance (Caton and Greenhill, 2014), or as part of the process of enrolment and induction (Piatt, 2012; Whitton et al., 2014). The latter two examples are more playful than others in that they move beyond using just the structures of games. Instead, they engage students in specifically playful 'alternative reality games' that involve the use of creativity to imagine the university in a different way. Perhaps for this reason, levels of engagement in these activities varied hugely with students; some engaged fully with the task, and others did not engage at all. This is, perhaps, one of the risks of playful approaches.

Play- and games-based learning has not been explored as a solution to the problem of widening participation in HE, but given the trajectory of both of these themes in literature it seems like it is just a matter of time. Technology has certainly been raised as a way to subvert existing practice and encourage participation from those traditionally less able to access learning (Benlamri et al., 2016), and as I discussed above discussion of games and play is tied to these more innovative technological approaches to education. This effective 'gap in the market' suggests that an obvious course of action is to explore games and play as solutions to widening participation, but a more critical approach to the issue would try to understand the relationship between problems and solutions in the context of contemporary HE more generally.



## **2.4 The context: Neoliberalism in higher education**

The discourse of problems and solutions in education needs to be understood in a wider policy context which can be broadly characterised as neoliberal. Since the 1970s, neoliberalism has been the dominant political-economic ideology in the UK, proposing individual freedom as the best way to advance human well-being, and, in practice, requiring states and institutions to maintain private property rights, free markets and free trade at every level of society (Harvey, 2005). As part of this, public institutions, including universities, have shifted towards operating on the principles of the market in order to encourage efficiency and personal freedom, and these institutions are understood in terms of their function in economic production (Olssen and Peters, 2005).

Within HE institutions (and the education sector more generally) neoliberal ‘policy technologies’ borrowed from the private sector (Ball, 2017: 50) have changed the ways in which individuals interact with each other within systems, and what is perceived as valuable. This technocratic approach affects the way in which educators understand the purpose of their own practice. If education is seen as a process of production, education policy’s role at a national and local level is to solve problems in an efficient way. Writing about schools, Ball refers to a continuous cycle of improvement, as old problems are solved and replaced by new ‘needs’, requiring successive interventions (2017: 133). This is part of the logic of management in education, and implies a certain type of intervention that can be measured, assessed and transferred to other contexts.

WP is subject to this cycle, to the extent that it can be seen as an archetypal ‘issue’ in HE. Though the question of who has the right and ability to participate in HE has been posed since the foundation of the first universities, WP as it exists today really began to emerge alongside neoliberal economic and social policies (Kettley, 2007). Whilst it is not by definition a neoliberal issue, its entanglement with neoliberalism has led to it being understood in instrumentalist ways; HE has an impact on the economy, and WP contributes

to this by producing a greater quantity of qualified graduates. In response to increasing policy-steering from central government, WP as a field has become professionalised, and is seen as a process separate from the day-to-day functioning of university teaching and learning. Successful participation is interpreted as the result of interventions from national and institutional WP policies which are essentially recruitment strategies, especially at elite universities (Rainford, 2017). This implies that what happens after recruitment is not a WP 'problem'. Williams (2013) claims that this approach to WP has in turn led to students behaving as consumers, to the extent that they now tend to make decisions about participation on the basis of employment prospects for graduates, offset against the actual or perceived cost of education. Budd (2017) contests this idea, arguing that it oversimplifies students' relationships with their education and justifies a distorted 'passive' notion of students in pedagogy. Whilst this challenge is valid, the very fact that students *can* be seen as consumers means that universities may presume they *are*, and frame interactions with potential and existing students in terms of the customer-value judgements they are assumed to make (Woodall et al., 2014). This is the result of neoliberalism as a dominant discourse; it encourages individuals and organisations to act as if they are subject to market forces even when they are not.

The task of widening participation in HE, even when this is framed in terms of employability and skills, seems directly at odds with other policies which permit higher tuition fees for undergraduate study; the student-as-customer of education cannot behave exactly as the deregulated market dictates a student-as-product should, and one policy undermines the other. For non-traditional (particularly working class) students, the consumerist attitude can manifest as doubt as to whether participation in HE is worth the time, money and effort (Archer, 2003), which seems directly at odds with the equitable aims of WP policy. This has been particularly relevant since increased fees and cuts to national WP organisations by the 2010-15 Coalition government have led to even high-

achieving school-leavers choosing to skip university in favour of entering work (Burke, 2012). These kinds of responses, along with the apparent mismatch between ‘passive’ students-as-consumers and the desire for ‘active’ learning technologies like games, highlight that neoliberalism is not a consistent set of policies but rather a ‘complex, often incoherent, unstable and even contradictory set of practices’ that effectively operates as an epistemology in its own right (Shamir, 2008: 3). In academia, this incoherence can contribute to the sense of alienation that Hall (2018) identifies as stemming from competition, metrics and league tables, all of which dominate staff and student time to the extent that they have no control over the chaotic system of institutional demands.

It is worth acknowledging, of course, that play and games are just as much tied up with neoliberalism as education. Sport and video games are mass-market, multi-billion-dollar industries and discussions of play and games have expanded as leisure time has become more commodified in contrast to work. Under neoliberalism, games and play spaces are colonised by market forces (Harambam et al., 2011), and in return organisations co-opt the structures and mechanics of games in order to increase productivity and/or affect consumer behaviour. We can understand the idea of ‘gamification’ in these terms in that it reduces gameplay to a score in order to provide extrinsic motivation for engaging in specific activities, but potentially destroys play in the process (Bateman, 2018). Ferrara (2013: 291) argues that the use of serious games and gamification (in education) ‘implies an impoverished, cynical and exploitative view of games as inherently frivolous and mostly useless’, and that its use involves games being ‘strip-mined for their “useful” elements’. What he captures here is a sense that, as in education, there is something valuable beyond the instrumental outcomes of games, but that under neoliberalism this is often ignored or deemphasised.

Ball (2016) acknowledges that the word ‘neoliberalism’ is used as a catch-all for any problem with HE in the twenty-first century; it is often evoked uncritically, or without

considering the ways in which individuals respond to and interpret policy. Ball (2016: 1047) points out that it can refer to concrete policies, but also to the neoliberalism 'in here' that affects our interpersonal relationships on an intimate level (by, for instance, encouraging us to see ourselves as rational consumers, or alienated in the face of chaos). This is a more insidious conception of neoliberalism that ultimately affects what we see as 'common sense', and which undermines many of our fundamental values. For example, Brown (2015) argues that neoliberalism's economic reason goes beyond policy, placing it as a threat to democratic values. We might question the extent to which the neoliberal bogeyman actually exists, but regardless of its existence, it has a tangible effect on individuals' actions. At the very least, it encourages us to re-examine concepts like participation and play at a more fundamental level given a context that many interpret as neoliberal, and to attempt to view them outside of the logic of educational problems/solutions in order to raise new questions. As hinted throughout discussion so far, many of these questions are 'how' questions rather than 'why' ones, shifting from the motivation to use games as a way to solve problems like participation, and towards trying to understand how these concepts are experienced by people inside and outside of educational contexts. The next task, then, is to dive deeper into the concepts of participation and play in order to establish how they might be approached from a different direction.

## **2.5 Exploring participation**

I have already established that discussions of participation in HE tend to subsume the concept into 'widening participation'. In this section, I explore other concepts in HE which may provide insight into participation, as well as examining conceptions of participation that come from outside HE. Drawing these together, I end the section with some definitional work in order to establish the particular idea of participation upon which the rest of the thesis will focus.

### 2.5.1 Engagement

Participation is part of a family of concepts that describe the behaviours of students in HE, which also includes terms like 'engagement' and 'attendance'. In many cases one word can replace another because the same questions are asked about all of these concepts as problems. Beyond WP research, participation is entangled with 'engagement' in particular. Like 'participation', 'engagement' is a contested term, but it tends to cover more of what happens at university than established uses of 'participation', often through examining students' behavioural, emotional and cognitive responses to learning (Trowler, 2010). Despite the different focus, engagement tends to be understood in a similarly instrumentalist way, especially given its position within metrics like the National Student Survey and the Higher Education Academy's National Engagement Survey. These measures of engagement are seen as the key to understanding the quality of engagement, to the extent that using engagement as a metric can be considered 'academic orthodoxy' (Zepke, 2017: 95). This orthodoxy, though, can lead to a lack of critical understanding, as engagement, its causes and its effects are conflated (Kahu, 2013). This is a familiar story given previous studies of participation.

One of the solutions to this lack of critical understanding is to attempt to understand what educational engagement really means, both in policy and in practice. Eccles (2016) points out that engagement is a multidimensional concept occupying a broad space, and that this has led to unclear understandings which need to be made more precise. Whitton and Moseley (2014) deconstruct the term, distinguishing between superficial and deep engagement, and identifying subcategories within these that go some way to explain different ways of understanding engagement. They make a link between engagement in education and engagement with games in order to do this. This is an established connection which motivates many of the studies in the previous section. In

addition, they class 'participation' as a subcategory of superficial engagement, an idea which I return to below.

Others focus on particular aspects of engagement in order to understand it further. Kahu (2013) attempts to incorporate social and psychological approaches to engagement into a holistic model which widens discourse around engagement by including 'distal' long term non-academic impacts such as citizenship and personal growth, though it could be argued that the resulting model is too wide to be of use in analysis. Gourlay (2015) connects engagement with participation by examining how engagement is a performative practice, and critiques the idea that students need to be seen to be actively doing something in order to count as 'engaged'. On a similar note, Solomonides and Martin (2008) examine the 'ideals' that students have in their minds when they engage in education, how these are shaped by the ideals of academic staff, and how this transforms conceptions of engagement. This thread is continued by Kahn (2014), who places social relations at the heart of engagement, even in activities which initially appear to be solitary. Engagement is encouraged by reflexive academic and pedagogical practice founded in social relations.

This focus on social relations highlights that, ultimately, the use of 'engagement' in HE needs to be critiqued in the same way that the 'participation' in WP can be: through examining and transforming the way in which power relationships work in the university. Zepke's (2017) solution to the orthodoxy of engagement discourse is to approach it from the point of view of critical pedagogy. Similarly, McMahon and Portelli (2004), writing about education more generally, argue that engagement really only makes a difference when it is linked to the values of participatory democracy which make a qualitative difference to what happens in the classroom, and when both educators and students are encouraged to challenge the *status quo*.

There are clear overlaps between participation and engagement in that they both address student behaviours in and around education. Whilst any line between engagement

and participation will be blurry, there seems to be a difference between the concepts which supports my focus on the latter rather than the former; participation gives an opportunity to focus on the social and the situated (the 'being a part of something' in participation) more than engagement, with its links to individual motivations. The links between the two are important, though, and my reading of participation is influenced by these works on engagement, especially as they share common ground around constructivist learning theories and the active involvement of learners.

### 2.5.2 Transition

Considering the specific context of the foundation year, it is also worthwhile examining the concept of transition, which in the context of HE concentrates on the process that undergraduates go through when they start university. This is seen as a vital period in the lives of undergraduates in that it involves cultural, cognitive, social and emotional changes, all of which can be supported or hindered by HE institutions and practitioners (Johnston, 2010).

Similar approaches have been taken to transition as to engagement. Authors have examined: the emotional and behavioural roots of transition (Dias and Sá, 2014); the aspects of university experience that are positive and negative for transition (Hughes and Smail, 2015); and the effectiveness of the methods by which universities meet the needs of new students (Yorke and Longden, 2008). These are familiar modes of writing about educational problems, but they tend to take individuals' experiences more seriously in their approach, as well as acknowledging (more than the literature on engagement) that students are not blank slates but have a wealth of experiences that affect their participation in university.

In practical terms, transition also links back to WP in that they are seen as related problems. Part of the issue of ensuring underrepresented groups can attend university is

making sure that their entry into HE is not a discouraging experience. Research into transition has taken a similar approach to WP, using school-based interventions to prepare students for university teaching methods (Smith, 2012) or developing innovative pedagogical approaches to engage learners in transition (Moro and McLean, 2017). As with WP more generally though, it can be questioned whether these approaches are simply encouraging new students to conform to an ideal that is imposed by those with more power in the university; even exciting and innovative approaches can be challenging for new students to engage with, especially if they lack prior experience.

Approaches to transition illuminate participation because they tend to examine what actually happens in university in more detail than others do. They concentrate more upon students' voices and experiences as they participate in education. However, 'transition' is by definition a limited concept. At some point the assumption is that it is complete as students are firmly within the university, or begin to transition back out again and into the workplace. In this way transition is still tied up with many of the instrumentalist ideas I have critiqued, but it does provide a precedent for prioritising student experiences in HE.

### 2.5.3 Educational participation beyond HE

Given that participation is undertheorised in HE, it is also fruitful to look beyond HE to works on adult learning, as these works on more informal contexts may have a different approach to understanding participation. The theory of andragogy (Knowles et al., 2015) is perhaps the best known example of this, positing that adults learn in a different way from children because their learning is self-directed. Under this theory, participation in adult learning is characterised by a need to connect learning to both real world situations and learners' own experiences, and an intrinsic motivation that is not dependent upon the approval of educators or parents but on self-improvement and skill development. This is



particularly relevant for the students I worked with. Many of them have not followed the 'traditional' trajectory of HE students, often reengaging with education having spent time in the workplace. Others are in a transitional state between being childhood and adulthood. They are used to the strictures of conventional pedagogy and may expect different incentives to participate.

Having said this, it can be argued that many of the characteristics of andragogy that Knowles identifies are actually characteristics of good pedagogy too, and that if these were applied in schools then participation would be enhanced. Many of the characteristics of childhood education identified by Knowles are not necessarily dictated by the nature of children, but rather the school system as an institution. University is just as much of an institution. The educational techniques used are still described as 'pedagogy' even when dealing with adult learners. Ultimately Knowles' contribution is to challenge the use of terms like this, and to consider that learners (both children and adults) might participate differently depending on the activities in which they are involved.

Looking beyond adult learning theory, participation in HE can also be understood more obliquely through the lens of situated learning theory (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998), which will form a substantial part of the conceptual model I develop in the next chapter. For the purposes of exploring participation, it is notable that one of the central concepts in the theory is 'legitimate peripheral participation'. This places participation at the centre of a theory which relates persons, activities, context and meaning to the learning process. Lave and Wenger's argument is that learning occurs through a complex process, by which individuals become members of communities of practice by gradually increasing their involvement in practice. They describe the 'ambiguous potentialities' (p. 36) of this process, which can empower or disempower individuals, transform the context of participation, and demonstrate the multiple potential 'centres' of participation (i.e. no real 'ideal' toward which participants are aiming). Lave

and Wenger deliberately steer clear of formal education settings in their analyses, instead examining the way in which adults learn in formal and informal groups in and out of the workplace. This approach depends upon a deep understanding of the context in which participation occurs, and an openness to examine what might not 'count' as learning in more formal contexts.

Lave and Wenger do not call legitimate peripheral participation an educational model, and it has been argued that their concepts have, like many other theories, been co-opted by HE institutions to the extent that 'the original qualities of the concept have been lost' (Lea, 2005: 194). In raising this theory, I hope to illuminate their central idea that participation/non-participation is not a binary state. There are many different ways of participating in education, and what might seem like non-participation can have just as much of an impact on the meaning-making and community-forming practices that take place within a context as participation does.

A more critical approach to participation in adult education also leads to critical pedagogy, most notably outlined by Freire (1996). Freire's approach, which was initially developed through work in informal adult literacy education before its principles were extended by others, is predicated upon rejecting a 'banking' model of education in favour of one in which learners are co-creators of their learning and empowered to use education as a transformational process through which they challenge existing power structures. This model is effectively social constructivism taken to its logical conclusion, but with the significant addition of a moral aspect which foregrounds the idea that education forms a small but significant part of a much wider process of active political participation. Critical pedagogy could be (and has been) used merely as a justification for teaching in a more interactive, student-centred way. However, at its heart is a genuine moral imperative to transform lives by developing critical democratic values through participatory education. Like legitimate peripheral participation, I will return to the concept of critical pedagogy in

my methodology as this idea has major implications for the design of teaching and research. For now, it is enough to note that critical pedagogy makes a link between educational participation and political participation that goes further than the widening participation agenda's social justice aim, which tends to be understood in economic terms, and begins to transform the idea of participation. This depends upon questioning the logic of the sort of problems and solutions that HE offers to people.

#### 2.5.4 Reclaiming participation

Indeed, this idea is central to the lessons to be learned from the literature outlined in this section. As many of the more critical approaches to WP argue, there needs to be more of an emphasis on the activities that actually take place in HE settings, even when these are the kinds of activities that might not normally be included under conventional ideas of participation. Participation in the 'WP' sense seems too narrow; it can often be reduced to just 'turning up'. It is clear from examining participation (and related concepts) in other areas, especially more informal ones, that participation needs to mean actually *doing* something. What this 'something' is will often depend on the context in which people participate.

As mentioned above, Whitton and Moseley (2014) place participation fairly low on their scale of engagement, referring to it as engagement's 'behavioural' component (p. 442) which does not involve the learner being actively involved in their education. In the sense that I am using 'participation' I hope to challenge this by examining what people actually do when they participate, and their experiences in and out of the university as they become students.

This process involves stripping back some of the value judgements that surround participation, which in the neoliberal university is seen as a good thing. Instead of labelling the mere occurrence of participation as inherently valuable (or not), I want to examine the

qualities of different forms of participation. Some may not contribute to education, or may actively counteract educational processes. Honesty about these is part of the process of critically understanding participation in a way that is less tied into neoliberal understandings of what university students are *supposed* to do.

All of this leads me to a conceptualisation of situated participation in HE which concentrates on what students do in relation to each other and the context. This may seem tautological. All participation, essentially taking part in an activity, is situated. However, it is in these interactions in context that students have educational experiences, so this is where my focus lies. This is participation in the political sense. It is a situated participation that is ultimately focused on the extent to which students can impact upon their learning environment (and the other people in it) through taking part in activities. In a way, using this is essentially 'reclaiming' participation from the WP agenda, but doing so in order to better address some of the social justice issues that this agenda is intended to resolve.

## **2.6 Exploring play**

Having explored participation, I now turn to play which I will unpack in a similar way. Broadly speaking, play has been approached from psychological, philosophical and socio-cultural perspectives, all of which contribute to the particular conception of play which I use. Before diving into this discussion it is important to acknowledge what Juul calls 'the language issue' (2005: 28-9). Though the words are used interchangeably, a 'game' is generally seen as rule-based activity, whereas 'play' is seen as free-form; however, this distinction is dependent on the English language having two separate words that distinguish between these activities. In other languages, including some in which key play theorists wrote, there is no distinction between 'play' and 'game', or the relationship between them is cut more clearly. In considering works in translation it is vital to remember

that the distinctions we make between play and games may not be the same as the authors’.

For the sake of discussion, I will make a distinction between games and play as far as possible, though part of my focus will be on the blurred boundary between the two. What I will eventually settle upon is perhaps closest to the idea of ‘gameplay’ (i.e. the play that occurs within the specific context of a game), though I will argue that this sort of play can occur without a game.

### 2.6.1 The psychology of play

As mentioned above, children’s play is often understood in terms of the role it plays in the mental, physical and social development of children, but beyond this there has been an effort to understand the psychological motivations behind, and effects of, play in adulthood. For some theorists, adult play is effectively an extension of childhood play. Hutt (1981) defines play in contrast with ‘epistemic’ behaviours, and highlights its connection to imagination and fantasy. Similarly Lieberman (1977) makes a direct connection between playfulness and creativity, linking it to divergent and spontaneous thinking. Others see a connection between play and excitement. Play can be understood as a ‘paratelic state’ during which individuals seek intense, high arousal experiences (Apter, 1991), or an activity that produces a unified experience of ‘flow’ where the possible actions available to individuals lead to neither boredom nor anxiety (Csikszentmihalyi and Bennett, 1971).

Psychological approaches have influenced studies of participation in play which classify and rank playful behaviours in relation to other related personality traits. These characteristics are then used to attempt to establish what playfulness is and the role it has for individuals. Glynn and Webster (1992) connect play to spontaneity, humour and creativity, and then extend this further to examine how over 300 participants’ sense of playfulness correlated with their behaviours at work and university. They acknowledge that

further work needs doing in linking playfulness to these contexts, but make it clear that they see playfulness as something which is stable in individuals and which needs to be considered in understanding how people participate in activities. Barnett (2007) undertakes similar work with 649 undergraduate students to define qualities of play. Using a self-rating system, she finds young people identify playfulness with fifteen descriptive qualities including humour, fun, unpredictability, silliness and adventurousness, and that they perceive these qualities in themselves and others who they consider playful.

In terms of education, these approaches have much in common with approaches to children's play, to the extent that play may be understood as the evolutionary root of teaching and learning at all ages (Palagi et al., 2015). Play is understood in terms of its benefits for the individual, which in turn are often understood in terms of positive states of mind and growth. Yet as Van Leeuwen and Westwood (2008: 160) argue, in psychological works on both children and adults 'play is seldom studied in its meaning for the player but rather as a means to achieve developmental goals'. In capturing the psychology of play, it is possible to be fairly ambivalent towards what adults actually *do* when they play, which means it may be necessary to look beyond psychological approaches to understand what participation in play involves.

### 2.6.2 The philosophy of play

Philosophers attempt to understand play in definitional and theoretical terms, especially to test cases in which they are used as metaphors for other concepts (like, for instance, the use of games to describe neoliberalism). This approach stems from Wittgenstein's (1958) use of the word 'game' to demonstrate his 'family resemblance' theory of language. Indeed, two important philosophical works on play were written to directly challenge this language issue and seemingly develop influential theories of play in the process.

Midgley's (1974) response to Wittgenstein is to distinguish between games used as philosophical metaphors and games in reality. She concentrates on the idea of rules and how they pertain to metaphorical games like 'promising', but in the process discusses the way in which games, as supposedly 'closed' systems, overlap with the world and each other. It is possible to follow the rules of many games at the same time, each of which insists on being taken seriously. Her argument is that seeing games as closed systems does not help philosophical discussion of concepts that overlap with each other, but this argument in itself gives us much to think about when it comes to the limits of the rules of play.

Again responding to Wittgenstein, and taking inspiration from Plato, Suits (1978) uses play to describe a utopian ideal of a society in which everyone plays games, and in the process comes to define play as both rule-bound activity (where those rules are founded on the use of inefficient means to achieve goals) and through the 'lusory attitude' (p.43) which enables players to take these rules seriously simply because they are part of the game. Ryall points out that, beyond this, Suits is playful in his approach to writing about play:

[Suits' work] is far more than a straightforward attempt to undermine Wittgenstein by providing an analytic definition of the term 'game'. More than anything else it is a demonstration *in itself* of what Suits defines as a game, and thereby an example of 'sophisticated play' in action. (Ryall, 2013: 52)

In writing playfully, Suits demonstrates what inefficiency and the lusory attitude look like in practice. His incentive to write is not just to reach the 'goal' of a completed argument, but to enjoy the playful process of getting there. There is a paradox in his writing. In order to achieve the outcome of writing successfully about play, he emphasises the need to be playful, and is, therefore, not focused on achieving this outcome in the most efficient way. The key lesson from Suits' work is not just a definition of play but a theory of play *in practice*

that simultaneously acknowledges that one can have instrumental goals in playing, whilst also showing that these goals are not the sole reason why we play.

### 2.6.3 The culture of play

If psychological approaches go some way to answering the question of why people play, and philosophical approaches argue over definitions of the concept, socio-cultural studies tend to look at the question of how play manifests, both in and out of games. The introduction of culture invariably muddies the waters of the distinction between games and play because games (and sport) can be seen as codified play, and even when people participate in 'pure' play they do so in a cultural context in which games exist. This intensifies the language issue raised by Juul above.

The two key texts that are often invoked by cultural play scholars are Huizinga (1949) and Caillois (1961), both of whom draw upon play and games in order to explore their wider role in culture. Huizinga writes about the way in which play and culture are intertwined, especially through play's role in ritual and celebration. For Huizinga play is largely focused on the competitive, and is defined by its separation from 'the real world' through the role of different sets of rules and the imagination. He emphasises the shared nature of play even when this is not in the 'real world'. This forms a sense of being 'apart together' (1949: 12) in play, forming communities which can exist beyond one particular instance of a game.

Caillois takes issue with Huizinga's overemphasis on the competitive aspects of play, arguing that play has diverse and contradictory elements which, if one comes to dominate, can undermine play. Caillois develops this into a formal categorisation, positioning playful activities on a spectrum between childish *paidia* and rule-bound *ludus*, and dividing them between *agôn* (competition), *alea* (chance), mimicry and *ilinx* (dizziness or disorder). By defining and delineating different play and game experiences, he is able to better



understand the role that each one has in culture. Having said this, it becomes increasingly difficult to see what these disparate ideas of play have in common with each other beyond the broad definition that Caillois gives. Indeed, this is a key takeaway from Caillois; play can often be at odds with itself, and definitions can end up being contradictory or paradoxical, leading to confusion and the degradation of non-playful institutions and activities which depend upon them.

Despite the disagreements over the specific characteristics of play, Huizinga and Caillois share an emphasis on the separateness of play; the idea that it occurs beyond the confines of the 'real world' and is contained within a boundary in space and time. In addition to this, play is also a free activity; something which is not obligatory but which is entered into as a choice (indeed, there seems to be a connection between the enjoyment people find in play and the idea that they have chosen to play in the first place). Huizinga provides the clearest metaphor for this when he raises the idea of a 'magic circle' (1949: 10) in which play is 'an act apart' from the rest of the world. Along with legitimate peripheral participation, this will be central to my analysis for much of the thesis, and will be outlined further in Chapter 3. For now, it is worth stressing that freedom and separation are the aspects of play that seem most central to both cultural and philosophical theorists, and this may cause difficulties when thinking about play being applied in a 'real' setting like education in which there may be a degree of compulsion. I will discuss this point further in Chapter 7.

New forms of play (or at least forms of play that *look* new) lead to new understandings, and with the growth of videogames in the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries there has been an increased focus on play as it relates to these games in particular. Salen and Zimmerman (2003), for example, offer a model of play within the context of videogames that draws upon Huizinga, Suits and Caillois, defining play as 'free movement within a more rigid structure' (p. 304) but more importantly demonstrating that games are

not the only context for play. They include 'ludic' or game-like activities and being playful as other contexts, and argue that play can take different (albeit similar) forms depending on its context. This ties together videogame design and play scholarship as interrelated activities, enabling games designers like Koster (2013) and Bogost (2016) to enter the field of play theory. For Koster, play *is* learning, and only remains fun while learning is taking place. For Bogost, play is about the way in which rules constrain our behaviours even in ostensibly non-playful contexts. It is the limitations that games place on us that makes play enjoyable. This, however, leads to a conception of play that is concerned almost entirely with negative freedom (i.e. freedom *from* constraints) and the acceptance of limits, rather than examining what players are actually free *to* do when they play, and empowering them to do so.

Bogost's approach is illuminating because he positions himself firmly at odds with Sicart (2014), who emphasises the transformative and empowering aspects of play. Sicart identifies many aspects of play but draws particular attention to the carnivalesque, appropriative aspects through which players are able to control both playful and non-playful contexts. For Sicart, play is inherently contextual and political, and involves 'negotiating a wiggle space between rules, systems, contexts, preferences, appropriation, and submission' (p. 90). This wiggle space is key because it begins to undermine the separatedness of play suggested by other authors; play might begin in playful contexts, but it can enact change beyond these. Sicart acknowledges that this places play on a paradoxical borderline between triviality and seriousness, and between fantasy and reality, but it is this position that allows this process to take place. For Sicart, games are just one manifestation of a much wider ecology around play which includes toys, playgrounds, and playful rules and attitudes. All of these things can contribute to a creative, critical and personal conception of play.

This is play beyond the context of games, but also dependent upon them. On this theme, De Koven (2013) argues that play is at its best when players are free to negotiate their participation, change the rules of the game and engage in a process of 'coliberation' (p. 148) through which they seek freedom together. 'The game' is effectively a metaphor here, in a similar vein to Suits, but we can also see how it would affect actual gameplay. De Koven's approach is utopian (perhaps naïve) in that it places so much emphasis on players' power (and inclination) to change the games they are playing, and assumes that all of this change will ultimately be positive. However, he does not get tied up in strict definitions and categorisation, and acknowledges that players will always have an impact on the games they play through their experiences of playing. Malaby (2007) takes a similar approach, treating games as 'processual' (p.102), and noting that even stable games with established rules are subject to negotiation, improvisation and dynamic change. This ultimately influences his definition of a game as a 'semibounded and socially legitimate domain of contrived contingency that generates interpretable outcomes' (p.105). By emphasising the contingency within even the most rule-bound games, Malaby foregrounds the participation of players in both creating and thinking about games. This is, in effect, a more formal expression of De Koven's central argument. Both authors' ideas are reminiscent of those outlined by critical pedagogy in that they involve participants actively changing their contexts through participating in a social process.

#### 2.6.4 Defining play?

Sutton-Smith (1997) draws cultural approaches to play together, developing the idea that different 'rhetorics of play' depend upon the way in which play is being discussed. Thus the developmental perspective is emphasised in accounts of childhood play, the competitive aspect is emphasised by those seeking to examine how play relates to power, and so on. Importantly, for Sutton-Smith this leads to an ambiguity around play which conflates its

definition with its value, to the extent that play ‘cannot be neutrally interpreted’ (1997: 216). Definitions of play are emotive in that they are often developed by players themselves, and often by being definitional we exclude elements which other players may see as central. Play resists definition because people like to play with their definitions.

Eberle (2014) draws together definitions of play, finding that they are generally reducible to five key elements: play is purposeless, voluntary, outside the ordinary, fun and focused by rules. However, as he points out, these could apply to many non-play activities, and none of them produces an ‘ironclad test’ of play (Eberle, 2014: 216). His solution for examining play as developmental is to treat play as an emergent process that is ultimately dependent on dynamic relationships between players and rules, which in a way is what Sutton-Smith might see as a non-neutral or partial interpretation.

‘Defining’ is the wrong word for what I aim to do, so perhaps ‘partial interpretation’ is apt here too (‘partial’ in both the ‘not neutral’ and ‘not whole’ senses of the word). I want to concentrate on the particular aspects of play that help to understand participation. My working interpretation of play, then, is to treat it as a form of participation which follows a different set of rules to other forms. This set of rules is more inefficient, more chaotic and more creative than those seen as ‘normal’ in any given context.

This definition places play within a distinct set of rules, which is why it may be more like a conception of ‘gameplay’ than anything else. However, I would argue that even ‘free play’ follows rules to a certain extent, and at the same time it is possible to play a game more or less playfully depending on how one interacts with the rules in that context. The difference lies in how one shifts one’s relationship to the rules.

The elements I draw from others include Suits’ (1978) understanding of play as inefficient (including playful writing about play); De Koven (2013) and Malaby’s (2007) ideas of play as something controlling and controlled by players (especially with regard to dynamic rules); and perhaps most significantly Sicart’s (2014) ideas of an ecology of play

that goes beyond games, and play as the creative appropriation of context. To some extent all of these authors are willing to engage with the mess around play rather than trying too hard to categorise it. Much of their power of these works is in examining the elements that warp or skew these definitions, and the ways in which players themselves are a part of this.

Like my idea of participation, this is an explicitly political conception of play that has the potential to be powerful in education contexts. It shifts the discussion of play in education from its ability to motivate those who participate towards its power to encourage them to 'change the game'. This, of course, involves treating education as a game, but as my conceptual model will outline this may be apt metaphor given the way in which HE constitutes a set of rules. Of course, interaction with participants may even 'change the game' of defining play. I remain open to shifting this focus in light of my experiences with students.

## **2.7 Play\* and participation\* in HE**

Refocusing on particular aspects of participation and play in relation to each other shifts the horizons of my inquiry somewhat. Some of the works on games and education outlined earlier are a long way from the ideas that I want to interrogate. There are, though, other areas that are worth exploring with these refocused ideas in mind, especially those which examine participation in a playful way, and play in a participatory way.

### **2.7.1 Participatory culture and games**

Bateman (2017) argues that 'artefactual' readings of games as playful objects are incomplete, and that understanding games involves examining 'play as practice'; the ways in which players participate in communities, which necessarily include designers even when they are not in direct contact with players. This also includes 'lineages of play' (Bateman, 2017: 6), through which prior experiences of play affect current ones. The

implication of this is that all players have a history, and that their participation will depend upon this. Reflecting this idea, there is an approach to play in video games which highlights the concept of participation. Indeed, many of the works in this category treat the idea of participation far more critically than those examining participation in HE.

Players can also participate in different ways within the context of a specific game, and there are a number of approaches which examine the idea of 'playstyles' in order to understand how players interact with the rules of the game and each other. Bartle (1996) provides a particularly influential example, developing a taxonomy of four players ('Achievers', 'Socialisers', 'Explorers' and 'Killers') who respond to the game world and other players in different ways and who are motivated by different elements of the play experience. Given this, he identifies specific design principles which might ensure that games appeal to particular types of player. This is reminiscent of Kolb's (1984) influential concept of learning styles, which builds upon a constructivist idea of experiential learning to identify particular ways in which people learn from different experiences. Kolb stresses that this does not imply that individuals only learn in one way, but in practice there has been a danger of reducing learners to a particular style. Where playstyles and learning styles have been linked in literature with the goal of designing educational games that will 'work' for specific learners (Heeter, 2008) it is worrying that this may limit the experiences that individuals have in games and learning rather than expand their experiences.

Beyond the idea of 'playstyles', other authors build upon Jenkins (1992), who develops the idea of 'fandom' as a participatory community in which members both consume popular culture and appropriate it as a site for creativity. This idea of participatory culture has influenced works where authors act as player-ethnographers within specific communities of players. Pearce (2009) examines the 'communities of play' formed within a MMORPG, in which players produce new experiences, even beyond the confines of the game in the real world. Taylor (2017: 114) also treats video game players as producers,

especially in the role of ‘auxiliary tools’ like websites, forums and guides, which may not be counted as ‘official’ participation by games designers, but which are central for the players that do use them. Steinkuehler (2006) demonstrates that player communities also transform games through practice more generally, often resulting in emergent behaviours that are not intended or foreseen by designers. Massanari (2015) takes a similar approach to the online community *Reddit*, and demonstrates that users are playful in their participation whilst subverting and inverting this sense of play through taking advantage of the flexibility of the system’s rules. These ideas link back to De Koven’s (2013) idea of ‘changing the game’; through their participation, fans of these works move beyond the consumer paradigm and instead appropriate the contexts they are a part of. At the same time, the separation between contexts starts to blur as participants see less of a division between games and their ‘real lives’. Jenkins and colleagues (2006) revisit some of these ideas and how they might be applied to media education specifically, arguing that education in the 21<sup>st</sup> century needs to involve the sorts of pooled knowledge, negotiation and play that occur in participatory culture.

### 2.7.2 Academic and political play

Another way to approach the question is to examine works which have attempted to frame the university as an inherently playful space. Carnes (2015) traces university pedagogy back to the Socratic dialogue, and argues that the contemporary university experience is impoverished by a lack of play in teaching, though ultimately this is used to argue for a fairly conventional educational game. At a deeper level, Farrelly (2013) connects play to the development of democratic values, going on to evoke Dewey in arguing that a true humanities education would focus on participatory playful activities in order to inculcate these values.

In both of these cases, of course, there is a set of academic values that are being assumed. Academics are, ideally, like Socrates in that they are playful, critical and democratic in their approach. This has echoes of utopianism, to the extent that these authors could be accused of reinforcing the 'ivory tower' attitude that causes problems in participation in the first place. Having said this, these works connect to the thread of utopianism that crops up frequently in works on play. For many play scholars, including Suits (1978) and De Koven (2013), play is a utopian activity which actively brings about a perfect world. McKenna (2001) studies models of utopias, and suggests a distinction between static 'end-state' and dynamic 'process' models. It might be argued that the utopias that both play scholars and educationalists argue for are process ones. At the very least, these utopias require sustained collaborative participation in order to exist. Once more play and participation are intertwined through a focus on building political communities which transform the world.

Coming full circle and reincorporating play and games, Aaen and Nørgård (2015) develop the concept of 'participatory academic communities' which incorporate many of the ideas outlined in this section. Their approach to the design of a postgraduate course incorporates a critical moral purpose, an understanding of the difference between 'genres' of participation, and an experimental, playful mode of engagement, all of which extend beyond the classroom and the university. This has echoes of Nixon (2009), whose argument about universities as institutions claims that they need to recover the 'rich unpredictability of learning' (p.11) in order to become places that promote and sustain freedom. This type of approach seems to be the practical outcome of the definitions developed through a critical approach to play and participation in HE.



## 2.8 Conclusion: 'Finding the fun' in the literature review



Figure 2B: The world map from *Assassins Creed: Unity*

Figure 2B is a map of revolutionary-era Paris from *Assassin's Creed: Unity* (Ubisoft, 2014). Open-world games like *Assassins Creed: Unity* present players with a world map that is covered in icons. Each of these icons represents something to do: a mission that advances the plot of the game; a secret item that needs to be collected; or a character with an extra quest that builds the world. Technically, you finish the game when you mop up all of these icons, complete the attached tasks and get a '100%' score, and you could draw a direct line from map marker to map marker to get the most efficient route to completion.

Perversely, there is an element of gamification to this; the game offers you an extrinsic reward (a 100% score) for doing something that should be intrinsically rewarding (experiencing the game world). The difference between a good open world game and a bad one is often the way in which map icons are incorporated; if a player has to try too hard to 'find the fun', they will likely not enjoy the game. Often, the fun in 'bad' open-world games

is in ignoring the icons and doing exactly the opposite of what the game wants: refusing to progress the plot; exploring the hidden corners; and finding indirect, chaotic routes across the map. Not just playing the game, but playing with it.

This has been my approach to this chapter. The expected route, from participation as a problem to play as a solution, is the arrow at the top of the screen that suggests the most efficient path. By exploring more widely and inefficiently, and discovering different approaches that may not have been explored before in this context, I have made a new connection between play and participation which will inform the rest of this study (see Figure 2C).

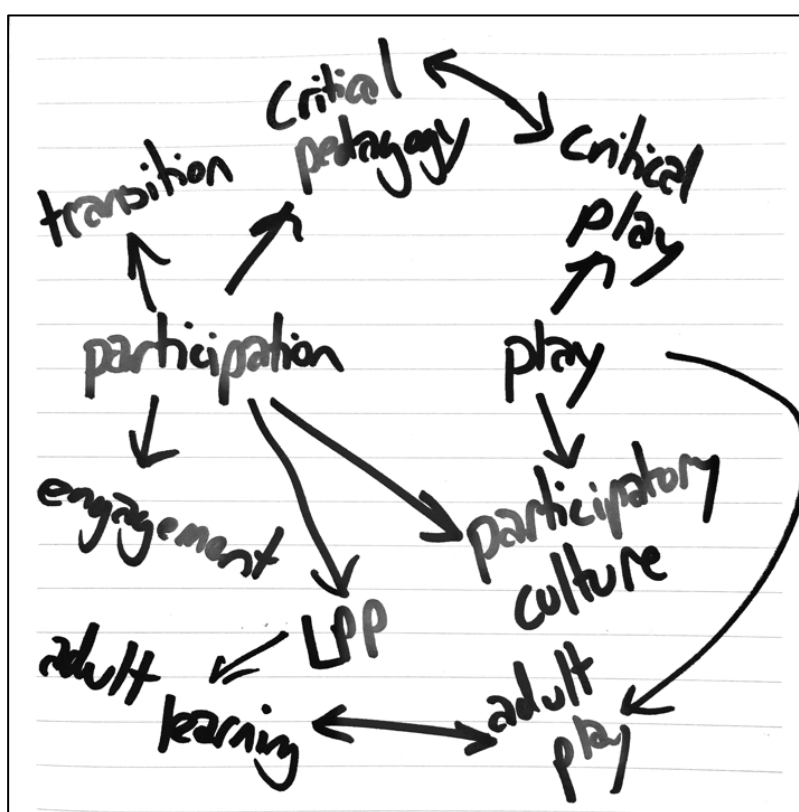


Figure 2C: 'Playing with' participation and play

Play and participation are similarly mistreated within the context of HE research. Participation, as a concept, is over-defined but under-theorised; it seems to be limited to the participation in 'widening participation' but there has not been enough work on what participation actually involves beyond attending university. Play, on the other hand, is under-defined but over-theorised; it is possible to find many different reasons why play is

a positive force in education, but very few works which actually agree on what play really is. Indeed, the very act of defining play might be a fruitless exercise because it encompasses so many different forms.

I have interpreted play as a form of participation, but beyond this there are commonalities between my interpretations of the concepts:

- I treat both as social processes. This emphasises their use as verbs rather than nouns, and allows me to concentrate on what individuals actually *do* when they participate and play. Whilst this will involve internal thought processes and mindsets to some extent, I am particularly interested in the way in which participation and play manifest in action.
- As a result, both are nebulous concepts which depend to some extent on the role that individuals want to play. Participation and play may mean different things to different people, and part of the challenge of studying both is to ensure that fixed definitions do not get in the way of identifying and interpreting new or challenging forms of participation and play. Because of this I am more interested in the *quality* of participation and play rather than just its existence.
- Both are also inherently political concepts. I am interested in the ways in which both play and participation depend upon the 'rules of the game', which are tied up with existing power relationships. At the same time both are connected to a form of democratic participation which is critical and which can subvert or change established ways of doing things.
- Finally, I treat both play and participation with a degree of ambivalence. Many existing approaches operate on the assumption that participation is a good thing, and that play is a positive force because of its beneficial outcomes. Whilst my personal inclination is to agree with this, I need to acknowledge that, for some

people, both play and participation may have negative connotations. At the same time, gameplay in particular is now so ubiquitous that it may not be the exciting, innovative approach that it is often sold as. By analysing participation and play within this specific cultural context I hope to find out if this reputation for positive outcomes is valid.

The process of engaging in a literature review has confirmed that there is an effective 'gap in the market' for an approach to play in HE that focuses on both play and participation as situated social processes. This approach will not answer the same questions as the works I have examined. It is unlikely to produce the sort of replicable, outcomes-focused results that many other writings on games in HE have aimed for. However, part of research is going beyond 'quick-fix' solutions, and through treating play and participation in this way I hope to enable a different form of analysis that foregrounds the experiences of students participating in play (and non-play) in HE. In this way I used my literature review to make a unique contribution to existing discussions of both concepts which will feed into new educational practice in the future.

### 3 – Conceptual model: The magic circle of participation

‘We didn’t tell you to scratch this box.’ Player card from *Pandemic Legacy: Season 2* (Daviau and Leacock, 2017)

#### 3.1 *Pandemic Legacy*

By the time you complete your final game of *Pandemic Legacy: Season 2* (Daviau and Leacock, 2017), many of the game’s components have been damaged beyond repair. Shreds of torn cards are piled up in the game box, there are stickers all over the players’ character sheets, and there is as much handwriting as there is printed text on the game board. Characters have died, rules have changed, and the game, whether you won or lost, is now unplayable.

As its name suggests, *Pandemic Legacy* is a legacy game; a growing genre of tabletop games that are designed to be played a limited number of times, and in which players’ actions in each session affect the rules and outcomes of future ones. In any game, players can introduce ‘house rules’ as they become more comfortable playing. Legacy



Figure 3A: A ‘used’ player card from *Pandemic Legacy: Season 2*

games make this process a part of the game itself. As players master the game, they open sections of the game box that include new rules, new cards and new playing pieces. The act of adding these elements (and destroying old ones) is enticing because, even when it involves following instructions, you get the impression that you are doing things you are not supposed to be doing.

In his talk at the 2017 Games Developer's Conference, Rob Daviau (who is widely acknowledged as the inventor of the legacy game concept) describes five 'covenants' between games designers and players that legacy games are deliberately designed to subvert:

1. The player decides how long a game is played.
2. Games allow for consequence-free exploration.
3. The game designer controls the materials.
4. Games tell you everything that's in the box.
5. The game designer isn't lying to you. (Daviau, 2017)

In breaking these covenants, legacy games change players' relationship to the rules and acknowledge the potential of creative destruction. This subversive, appropriative style of play is a natural extension of our tendency to negotiate and reinterpret the rules of any game. There is, though, something about doing this because you have been told to that undermines the sense of mischief (although designers can still allow for this, as the scratchcard in Figure 3A shows). The rules that tell you to change the rules seem to be operating in a different place than the rules that tell you to play the game in the first place. It is disorientating to think about this, especially given the way that the game follows you around when you are not playing it. Between games you will share ideas as to what to do next, replay failed scenarios in your head, and check online forums to see if others have had the same experience. Legacy games enable a kind of play that transcends the boundaries of the game, that draws the 'real world' in and pushes the game back out in

return. Playing a legacy game opens a door that cannot be closed. You find yourself thinking about transforming every rule you encounter.

### **3.2 Introduction**

My literature review provides the scholarly context in which my research takes place, but before I outline the practicalities of my methodology I want to establish a tool for analysis that will further position my research within existing literature. In doing so, I hope to provide a partial answer to all three of my research questions as they all concentrate on the overlap between play and participation. How might we best conceptualise this overlap so that we can examine play and participation as related processes?

In this chapter I introduce the conceptual model which I will go on to use in the three analysis chapters. This model draws together and expands upon elements of two existing ideas: Lave and Wenger's (1991) 'legitimate peripheral participation'; and Huizinga's (1949) 'magic circle'. Whilst both of these ideas were raised in my literature review as considerations of participation and play respectively, here I want to examine them more deeply with specific regard for their analytic potential for a research question that depends upon understanding what it is to become and remain a participant in a particular activity. In both cases, the models are useful because they capture some of the informal or taken-for-granted processes that occur in play and education, and they enable a better understanding of these processes as they occur in a specific context. Using them together is, effectively, an attempt to undertake a pragmatist negotiation of meaning through allowing two previously unrelated concepts to comingle. The product is a new understanding of the magic circle which could be valuable in other educational research contexts.

I begin by outlining each of the concepts in turn and justifying their use for this project, before discussing in more detail how they coalesce around four central themes

which can be explored with a new conceptual model. The central question that I am asking of both concepts is 'what does this concept lack that can be added by the other concept?'. In answering this question, I re-emphasise aspects of each concept that have perhaps been underused in other works, and discuss what is added by combining the two. Finally, I give some suggestions for how this concept might be used as an analytic tool in this specific study, although obviously the bulk of this work will appear over the three analysis chapters.

### **3.3 Legitimate peripheral participation**

It is perhaps fruitful to discuss the model that most directly addresses participation first. Lave and Wenger (1991) develop the idea of 'legitimate peripheral participation' (LPP) in their exploration of adult learning in informal contexts, inspired in part by the way in which learners become members of communities of practice through apprenticeship. LPP is a transitional concept, intended to capture the way in which newcomers become increasingly involved in communities over time, and the way in which cognitive processes of learning stem from this involvement. This form of learning is dependent on engagement in social practice, even from an initial stage when learners might appear to be outsiders. This is where the concept of 'peripheral' comes in; it captures the idea that all newcomers start 'outside' a community and need to begin practice through less intensive introductions to the meanings and tools that are used by other members of the community. This also introduces the idea of 'legitimacy' in that these meanings and tools are subject to control by more experienced members of the community. Indeed, as individuals move towards fuller, less peripheral participation in communities they are also able to participate more in the complex processes of negotiation that constitute this legitimacy.

One of the key things to remember about LPP is that it has its roots outside of the formal education system in Lave and Wenger's study of learning at work and in community environments. Lave and Wenger stress that LPP is not an educational form, pedagogical



strategy or teaching technique (1991: 40), but it is clear that the model has implications for formal learning settings like HE institutions. Indeed, Wenger's later work moves more towards offering a learning design built on the back of previous theoretical work (Wenger, 1998; Wenger, 2002). This is somewhat surprising given Lave and Wenger's initial insistence that LPP is not a pedagogical strategy in its own right, but Wenger's work remains fairly conceptual and only moves into practical advice in its conclusions. Others, however, have built LPP into arguments in favour of particularly educational tools, especially those which fall into the camp of constructivism (e.g. game-based learning). LPP goes hand-in-hand with constructivism (especially the 'social' end of constructivism) because it highlights the ways in which learning happens as part of a much wider social process. One argument that could be made from this is that educators can manipulate social processes in order to encourage learning.

In response to this approach, Lea (2005) explicitly reclaims the model as an analytical tool, fighting what she calls its uncritical use. One of the main issues she identifies is the way in which LLP's 'informal' learning is used to justify policies such as cutting teachers' contact time with students, with the excuse that universities might foster artificial 'communities of practice' as a replacement. For Lea, many of these (mis)understandings are based upon a flawed reading of the model, which needs to be seen as incorporating broader institutional contexts and lived student experiences as well as what happens in the classroom. It is in this spirit of reclaimed criticality that I use LPP as more of a heuristic of learning than a teaching model.

As an example of this, Brew (2006) uses the model to explore a form of academic scholarship which incorporates diverse teaching and research activities within 'scholarly knowledge-building communities' that include lecturers and students. Brew's conceptualisation acknowledges that the idealised, designed undergraduate experience is not necessarily reflected in the actual ways in which students come to participate in

university communities, and this is something I intend to reflect. Brew uses this model to develop recommendations for teaching and learning, but these are not the sort of repeatable activities that can be transferred to other contexts, but rather are deliberately situated in the mess of universities that engage in both teaching and research.

### **3.4 The magic circle**

The second model upon which I draw does not directly consider participation, but if we take a lead from the literature review and read it as analysing play-as-participation there are overlaps with Lave and Wenger. Huizinga introduces the concept of the ‘magic circle’ early in his *Homo Ludens*, in a brief paragraph that focuses on the way in which play can be considered separate from the ‘real world’:

All play moves and has its being within a play-ground marked off beforehand either materially or ideally, deliberately or as a matter of course. Just as there is no formal difference between play and ritual, so the “consecrated spot” cannot be formally distinguished from the play-ground. The arena, the card-table, the *magic circle*, the temple, the stage, the screen, the tennis court, the court of justice, etc. are all in form and function play-grounds i.e. forbidden spots, isolated, hedged round, hallowed, within which special rules obtain. All are temporary worlds within the ordinary world, dedicated to the performance of an act apart. (Huizinga, 1949: 10, emphasis added)

It is important to note that this paragraph is brief, and although Huizinga returns to the ideas of separation and ‘special rules’ in his exploration of play as culture he does not define the magic circle any more explicitly. It is one of many examples of a bounded ‘play-ground’ in which the rules are different. The magic circle stands out, perhaps, because it has such an evocative name with such rich potential for interpretation.

The idea has been taken up by games theorists in the twenty-first century, specifically because the growth of videogames has led theorists to want to understand

engagement in virtual worlds that are distinct from reality. This revitalisation is based largely upon Salen and Zimmerman (2003), who raise the magic circle as part of a wider discussion of the role of play in game design, and frequently return to the concept as they discuss the relationship between players, games and rules. Their argument sparked renewed interest in the concept of the magic circle among games designers and scholars, to the extent that many discussions of the concept can be read as responding to them as much as Huizinga.

Stenros (2012) discusses the idea that the boundary around play can be seen as psychological, social or cultural, and ultimately argues that the magic circle is an apt metaphor for the social separation of play as it captures the processes of social negotiation and metacommunication involved in play. I tend towards this interpretation as it foregrounds the role of some of the core ideas behind pragmatism as outlined in the next chapter. Activities like play (even when done alone) are part of a wider system of communication and social negotiation that necessarily involves others. It is worth being aware that the upshot of taking this approach is that, once again, the linguistic and cultural overlap between games and play can muddy the waters somewhat. A social approach to the magic circle requires understanding the rules that players follow, and while these may be more evident and reified in gameplay it needs to be stressed that they are also there in less formal play contexts (especially in play in adulthood).

As with LPP, there is some debate over whether the concept of the magic circle has been misinterpreted and misused in practice. For example, Philips (1973) criticises Huizinga directly for separating play and work from each other (although it can be questioned whether he actually does this given that he considers that institutions such as courts and commercial trade stem from play). Following this, Consalvo (2009) sees the concept as overly rigid and formalist in its separation of play and 'the real world' given how players actually interact with games, although it could be argued that this is more of a problem

with Salen and Zimmerman's interpretation of the idea than the original. Others have taken the magic circle as something of a challenge. Schleiner (2010) sees it as an ideal to be critiqued through design of games that give players control of the rules in and out of playful contexts. It could be argued that Rob Daviau's development of legacy games fits into this category of game design.

It needs to be understood and acknowledged that these critiques of the magic circle are very often distanced from Huizinga by an additional half-century of new forms of play and games, and the scholarship that surrounds them. Indeed Zimmerman (2012) is keen, in retrospect, to emphasise that his work with Salen was intended for games designers and that the 'magic circle jerk' against whom many accusations of rigidity and formalism are made is a straw man. Arguments over whether play really is separate, or whether the magic circle is breakable, ignore that Huizinga was fairly open in his discussion of the magic circle in the first place. Returning to the original text emphasises the idea that, whatever form it actually takes, the magic circle can be useful in discussing the extent to which play is separated from non-play (if it is), how players move from 'inside' to 'outside' the circle, and the rules that players follow when they do, all of which will be important in my discussion of participation.

### **3.5 Drawing the models together: Rules, circles, edges, magic**

The idea of linking socio-cultural models of education and play is not a new one. For example, Gee's (2007) concept of 'affinity groups' of individuals that share ways of interacting, thinking, valuing and believing, can be used to describe both groups of players and students as they work within specific semiotic domains. Affinity groups recognise insiders and outsiders, have particular ways of doing and talking about things, and are associated with particular contexts. All of this seems familiar from Lave and Wenger's model.

The magic circle itself has been used in discussions of education, particularly those which examine game-design in educational contexts. Nørgård and colleagues (2016) use it to discuss the way in which play can provide a 'safe space' for student exploration which is marked off from other spaces. Remmele and Whitton (2013) use it within the specific field of games-based learning to the ways in which students 'play against the game' by pushing at the boundaries of the magic circle. McNicol (2017) specifically evokes the 'magic' of the magic circle in her discussion of 'social haunting' in a community education context, emphasising the hidden processes that can sometimes evade our senses. The metaphor allows these contrasting approaches because of the different ways in which it can be interpreted. Although it is a theoretical rather than practical model, in each case it makes a contribution because it provides new ways of seeing existing processes, which in turn can inspire new practice.

My aim is that my particular interpretation of the magic circle and LPP does the same. It involves four themes: rules; circles; edges; and magic. I see these as the areas over which the existing models of the magic circle and LPP overlap. There is productive power in these overlaps because they can contribute to a new understanding of both models.

### 3.5.1 Rules

Both models are fundamentally about the jurisdiction of rules, so it makes sense to begin with these. For Huizinga 'special rules' exist in the magic circle that do not apply elsewhere. These might be the specific rules of a game, or a less formal Suits-esque agreement to behave in inefficient ways in accordance with the lusory attitude. For Lave and Wenger much of situated learning involves the specific application of rules within context. As I will outline in Chapter 4, rules can essentially be seen as shortcuts in social interactions that enable us to communicate effectively and enact change in the world. Membership of a community necessitates understanding and applying its rules effectively.

In their discussion of the magic circle, Salen and Zimmerman contrast three frames for games which interpret them as rules, play or culture, with each frame more open to interpretation than the last (2003: 96-7): games understood in terms of rules are a formal system; games understood as culture can encompass all of the things that take place around a game which are not mandated by the rules; and games understood as play lie somewhere in between because players draw upon external influences as well as the rules of the game. Having said this, my approach to culture itself is that it can be understood through the rules that individuals and groups use to communicate meaning, so it could be argued that all three of these frames are fundamentally about rules. We just need to contrast the 'rules of the game' from the 'rules outside the game'. Harviainen (2012) takes this approach, using the idea of the ritual to explore how the magic circle acts as a barrier between sets of rules. This means it is the threshold at which participants need to seek new information in order to understand what is expected of them in a new context. These 'anomalous states of knowledge' (Harviainen, 2012: 516) can be a source of learning in education settings, or can encourage learners to look outside of the setting for guidance.

In considering the jurisdiction of rules, combining the magic circle with legitimate peripheral participation also enables us to consider the ways in which rules change through negotiation. It is already clear that players will change the rules of the game when they can; indeed play itself can be seen as a negotiation of 'wobble space' around rules (Sicart, 2014: 90). For Wenger (1998), participation in a community of practice, whether as a newcomer or an established member, necessarily involves the reciprocal negotiation of meaning and identity, both of which are rule-based. This participation in negotiation is a vital part of the learning process as it encourages transformation of meaning and identity, and it is important to note that, whilst established members may have more power in negotiations of meaning, transformation can still occur through the actions and interactions of less

powerful members of the group (i.e. the newcomers). In this way, the rules shift and transform over time in reaction to the community following them.

### 3.5.2 Circles

Huizinga obviously invokes the imagery of the circle as one of many ways to describe a bounded play-ground, but the choice of a circle in particular is useful in that it allows us to consider the way in which participation can change over time as it moves towards and away from the centre of the magic circle. Whilst Lave and Wenger's community of practice does not have a shape *per se*, it has multiple peripheries and a centre, which again lends itself to the idea of a circle. Many different things count as peripheral; there are countless ways to begin participation even if actions will eventually coalesce around more defined practice.

This idea is complicated by Lave and Wenger's insistence that the community 'has no single core' (1991: 36), but that it may have multiple centres towards which legitimate peripheral participation moves. For this reason there is no such thing as 'complete' participation with which to contrast peripheral participation. Instead they use the idea of 'full participation' to allow that there are many ways of participating even at the 'centre'. It is the quality of the participation rather than the specific activities undertaken that makes the difference. In any case, the circle is still useful here as it allows us to contrast these centres from the edges, though it is worth keeping in mind that there may not be a single centre towards which newcomers aim.

One reading of a circle might be that it is still a binary. There is, after all, an inside and an outside. In both models, though, the image of the circle is useful because it breaks down the perceived binary between 'participation' and 'non-participation' in a particular context. For a start, the existence of a centre and a peripheral implies a grey area somewhere in the middle. It also goes further than a linear spectrum between in and out

by demonstrating that we are dealing with many spectrums and many ways to be 'out' of the circle and to move towards the centre.

If there are many entry points to the magic circle, and many centres, analysis needs to embrace the fuzziness that this entails, and examine the process of moving between modes of participation rather than categorising activities as participation or non-participation. I will argue that even a shift between what might be labelled two different kinds of 'non-participation' may be important in understanding the trajectories of participants, as it may go some way to illustrate how a participant's relationship to the rules and the others in the magic circle is changing. This is a vague, fuzzy conception of participation, but is useful for capturing the subtleties of experience.

### 3.5.3 Edges

Beyond the shape of the space, its boundedness is also a vital aspect of both models. The existence of the periphery is vital for legitimate peripheral participation to occur; peripherality is a 'positive concept' that provides an 'opening' for participation to begin (Lave and Wenger, 1991: 37). Regardless of debate over its rigidity as a model, the magic circle of play exists in contrast to something else that exists outside of the circle; a less playful set of rules that are temporarily suspended during play. The concept of liminality can be applied in both of the models to examine what constitutes crossing over the edge of the circle in order for participation to be contained within it (or indeed, crossing in the other direction so that one is no longer participating). This is especially the case given that the boundary itself is a vague one.

Given this, it is easy to start to think about how the boundary of the magic circle is permeable. Evoking Midgley (1974), Salen and Zimmerman (2003: 96) discuss the idea that games can be viewed as open or closed systems. Within closed systems the magic circle is solid and the game is a self-contained system; within open ones there is interchange



between the game and the world beyond the magic circle. Having established this division they emphasise that it is not paradoxical to see a game as both an open- and closed-system at the same time by examining which rules bleed in and out and which do not. In the same way, we can see that beginning participation in any community might involve bringing in ideas and rules from outside of that community. Whether these are accepted or challenged by existing members comes down to many factors, but this is useful to explore because it acknowledges that, in some cases, new members of a community have the capacity to challenge power structures within that community.

In this way, the edges of various ‘magic circles’ can be seen as overlapping with each other, and participation in one circle may affect participation in others. Unlocking this aspect of the concept of the magic circle opens up questions of what happens when the rules of one circle clash with those of another, or how identity and meaning might change as two circles begin to overlap with each other. Participation as a concept becomes less about one specific activity in a particular context, and more about the multitude of different activities which take place in many overlapping contexts. Importantly, circles, along with their edges and centres, can move in response to the actions of the community of participants. As in legacy games, a game can shrink or grow to encompass other actions as players discuss the game with friends or watch ‘Let’s Play’ videos on YouTube. There is ‘no easy boundary’ to the magic circle (Consalvo, 2007: 190). Similarly, in education settings it is rare for activities to be confined to the classroom. This model can help us to analyse how and why these shifts and leaks occur.

#### 3.5.4 Magic

Is any of what I have described so far really magical? In examining participation in detail, we describe many of the more mundane things that occur in the experiences of participants, which seems at odds with the extraordinary ideas that ‘magic’ implies. Salen

and Zimmerman (2003: 97) claim there is something ‘genuinely magical’ that occurs when a player enters a game, in that previously unimportant things suddenly become the most important, and spaces are transformed. However, given their ubiquity, games might not even be that magical anymore; Pargmann and Jakobsson (2008) argue that games are now so ubiquitous, and expand into so much of our lives, that the label no longer applies.

This does, though, give a hint as to what I intend by evoking the ‘magic’ in the magic circle. I use it as shorthand for the informal, chaotic and unpredictable processes which occur as part of participation, and for the things that seem to happen *only* within the context in which it takes place. These are ‘magical’ not because they differ from the ‘ordinary’ but because they offer a contrast with the sort of things that rules in other contexts concentrate on: the officially-sanctioned or easily-measured outcomes that form an ideal conception of participation. The landscape of practice as experienced is ‘not congruent with reified structures of institutions’ (Wenger, 1998: 118-9), and although it is not independent of them it, often participation will occur around ‘official’ boundaries rather than strictly within them.

Importantly, this sense of magic seems to enable everything else. It is the root of the ‘legitimacy’ of legitimate peripheral participation in that it provides a way in, a route by which participants can roll up their sleeves and get involved even while they are learning the way in which communities work. They are not expected to do things perfectly or efficiently first time. Using ‘magic’ as a metaphor captures the mess and inefficiency of their participation, and also the moments when they are surprised or shocked by their own abilities. Ultimately this is where a sense of play enters the model. The sense of playful (and inefficient) exploration that is necessary to experience fully depends upon some of this ‘magic’ even in the most mundane contexts.

### 3.6 The magic circle of participation

Drawing these ideas together into a coherent model might look difficult. From one angle it looks like a potentially infinite overlapping set of non-circular circles with edges that might not exist and which do not really contain anything. The core idea that participation in any context, playful or non-playful, occurs within a magic circle, has potential, though. It builds upon the concept of the magic circle by acknowledging its power in describing the boundedness of activity whilst questioning the strength of those boundaries and extending the idea beyond play. In addition, it develops the idea of LPP by foregrounding many of the ideas that it can be easy to overlook; that even the context in which participation takes place is separated from (and connected to) other contexts, and that newcomers can play a part of the process of negotiation in order to transform the context. These are the central ideas on which the model of the magic circle of participation is founded.

The model of the 'magic circle of participation' treats all contexts as potentially magical in that they are 'special' when contrasted with other contexts. Given this, participation can be understood in terms of: the particular ways in which rules apply; the extent to which it is peripheral or full; how it is affected by overlaps with other contexts; and how its 'magic' manifests in informality and playfulness. These four themes provide a hook for analysis of experience by viewing participants in relation to the context and each other. It is a model of situated, social participation that acknowledges that participation, by definition, depends upon other people.

Within a foundation year context, we can be more specific in how these might apply. Before I even introduce data in Chapter 6, my prior experiences of HE suggest the following:

- Rules: There are many formal rules that students are expected to follow in HE, and their participation is often understood in terms of the extent to which they follow these rules by attending lectures, submitting assignments on time, and so on.

Beyond this, there are even more informal rules around 'being a student' that we can interrogate through examining their experiences. In both cases, students' relationships to the rules may change over time as they become more able to negotiate the context in which they are working.

- **Circles:** As newcomers to the university, foundation year students seem to enter a both a community of students and a wider community of scholars at the periphery and move towards the centre(s). However, these centres are ill-defined and, in many cases, students may differ in their views of what their end-goal is. At the same time, through negotiating with others, students themselves are able to shift the boundaries of the circle. What 'counts' as participation (or non-participation) may shift depending on this process of negotiation.
- **Edges:** Students take part in many different activities in different contexts, and as such are part of many overlapping magic circles of participation. Students come to university already participating in other areas (family, work, their local community) which may supersede their participation in university. Their experiences in education do not occur in a vacuum, and similarly their experiences of education may shift and transform experiences in other contexts.
- **Magic:** In contrast to an implied discourse of efficiency and hygiene around education policy, HE is a potentially inefficient, messy process in which students and teachers can be frustrated and surprised. Examining the idea of magic allows me to capture some of these inexplicable experiences, along with considering what makes the rules of HE in particular 'special' in contrast to the rules elsewhere. I use this in particular to examine students' participation in the playful activities which I designed and delivered, but find that it is applicable to their participation in university more broadly. Indeed, as I will argue in Chapter 7, it became increasingly

difficult to 'contain' my study within the former, which is why the latter came into play.

This builds upon the definitional work from my literature review, encouraging a broader conception of what can be considered participation within a particular context. I err towards a broad conception because I am keen to uncover participation in unexpected places, and to play with my own experiences in order to connect them with those of students. This broadness may have some controversial outcomes. We may include within 'participation' behaviours that might otherwise be classed as non-participative, or even disruptive. However, I want to acknowledge the impact that these forms of participation have on others, as even 'just turning up' can have an effect on a community.

It may seem surprising given my focus so far that this model is not as playful as it might be, but I want to emphasise that I am using play as a way into a much wider topic. The 'magic' in this magic circle includes play but is not limited to it, although given the sense of playful pragmatism that I will outline in the next chapter it could be argued that students are playing to some degree in their learning. In the same way that I broadened 'participation', I also wanted to broaden my own ideas around play to incorporate experiences of students as they come to approach both playful and non-playful activities.

### **3.7 Conclusion: Pushing at the boundaries**

This chapter moves towards an answer to all three of my research questions in that it continues the process I started in the literature review of combining play and participation in new ways. All three research questions depend upon this combination, and my analysis chapters will build upon this by providing exemplars of the sorts of analysis that can happen when we see play and participation as related processes.

The model of the magic circle of participation draws upon two established models that can be (and have been) interpreted in countless ways. My particular interpretation of them allows for a model that treats play and participation as processes that occur in similar ways, and gives a way to interpret and analyse them using the four central themes of rules, circles, edges and magic. In each of my three analysis chapters, I will return to these themes as I begin to unpack data from interviews, observations and reflective writing. The magic circle of participation gives me the means to do this in a consistent way, whilst providing a way to constantly push at the boundaries of what participation is, which is vital for transforming the role it has in HE institutions.

In this way, whilst this chapter is not focused on data, I have presented hints of how the theoretical model of the magic circle of participation might be useful for practitioners and institutions because it is a device for thinking differently about participation. Ultimately, this requires honesty about the processes that researchers (and educators) go through. Indeed, in Chapters 7 and 8 I will explore the idea that often the method by which we develop ideas can contribute as much to our understanding as the content of those ideas. The magic circle of participation has its roots in two anthropological and cultural-historical models that have both been used to influence practice, and my interpretation of them feeds these ideas back into theory in order to combine them, with the knowledge that this will then return to practice again. My interpretation is intended to analyse data, but also came out of the process of collecting that data, as I confronted existing models and my ideas were challenged and troubled by how these work in practice. What I have presented as a 'tidied up' analytical tool is in fact the result of a long and ongoing conversation between research and practice. It is influenced directly by Huizinga, Lave and Wenger, but also by the years I have spent in the classroom and playing games, and the way in which these have intertwined throughout my experiences of education. To return to the game that I began the chapter with, the model is part of a 'legacy' that stems from

the numerous ways in which I have participated in the past. I will return to this idea in Chapter 7 as I interrogate the extent to which theory and practice, and research and teaching, can really be separated from each other.

Returning to the central theme of the thesis, invoking the magic circle of participation also affords us new ways of thinking about widening participation as a policy area because it acknowledges that participation does not happen in a vacuum, and that context matters. This might seem so obvious as to not be worth studying, but it is vital to understand because, by definition, WP exists on the border *between* contexts. The interplay of these contexts around individual participants becomes even more powerful when these are considered as overlapping magic circles because we are drawn to the unique things that occur in each of the contexts, and the way in which these might cross official boundaries. Using the model also demonstrates that participation might involve a major and permanent transformation, of both the individuals involved and the new setting they have joined. This seems to go beyond the scope of WP policy that only looks at inputs and outputs, and reiterates that WP might consider these changes that occur in the middle.

## 4 – Methodology: Playful pragmatism

‘Democracy begins in conversation’ John Dewey, 1949 (Quoted in Fesmire, 2015: 172)

[Dewey’s work’s] greatness lies in the sheer provocativeness of its suggestions about how to slough off our intellectual past, and about how to treat that past as material for playful experimentation rather than as imposing tasks and responsibilities upon us. Dewey’s work helps us put aside that spirit of *seriousness* which [...] philosophers are traditionally supposed to maintain. (Rorty, 1982: 87)

### 4.1 *Mysterium*

I am a ghost with a deck of cards. On each card is an abstract image; a hammock strung between two trees floating above a collection of windows, symbols drawn in the sand on a beach, a fat rat on a chess board. Silently, I hand a card across the table to a player and, after staring at it for a few seconds, she begins to think out loud.

“Well there’s blue in the background of both of the cards you’ve given me, and I already know it’s not the statue, so I’m going to say it’s the other blue card. Is it the knife?”



Figure 3A: The Ghost’s cards from *Mysterium*



I knock twice for 'no', and everyone cries out in frustration.

We are playing *Mysterium* (Nevskiy and Sidorenko, 2015), a critically-acclaimed co-operative tabletop game in which players communicate with the ghost of a murder victim in order to identify their killer, the location of their death and weapon with which the deed was done. These are selected from a collection of illustrated cards that are laid out on the table, and the ghost can only direct players to the correct images by handing over cards from their own separate deck of abstract images. This evokes the hazy, vague way in which dreams are remembered upon waking. The ghost may have a clear message to impart, but can only do so through images and metaphors. With the added pressure of a time-limit, the game is a race against the clock to solve the murder using nothing but easily misinterpreted clues.

At the start of the game, in order to evoke a 1920s séance, we had decided that the ghost should only communicate through knocking on the table, but invariably I end up communicating more through my frustrated grimaces and clenched fists as the other players consistently make decisions that are the opposite of my intentions. I am trying to direct this player to the chest with cards that have square, chest-shaped objects on them, but she keeps focusing on the colour of the cards instead.

Another player has had a run of good luck in guessing the correct answers, but has assumed that I keep making puns by handing him cards that include homonyms of the objects I am trying to direct him to. Now all of the other players are looking for puns that are not there. I have been trying to fight this, but in the end, it provides a solution. Using my unearned reputation for wordplay, I hand over the card with a chessboard on it. This has square objects *and* a pun ('chess'/'chest'), which, along with the collective process of elimination going on around the table, finally directs my fellow player to her correct answer. Case closed.

Playing *Mysterium* is communication in slow motion. It lays bare all of the steps necessary to get your meaning across to another person, and resurfaces all of the things that could go wrong which we often bypass with social convention (and therefore take for granted). Players think out loud, voicing every assumption they make and opening up their reasoning to scrutiny from others. In conversation, they argue over tiny details of meaning and listen carefully to how others speak so that they do not repeat their mistakes. They establish patterns that become useful later on, or they inadvertently develop habits that lead to dead-ends. It is a messy process in which it is easy to get things wrong, and in which people have to develop new methods of dealing with issues on the fly. Yet somehow, it is *not* miraculous that by the end of the game everyone has reached the correct answer.

## **4.2 Introduction**

In this chapter, I outline the philosophical foundation of the thesis, which has its roots in a playful interpretation of Deweyan pragmatism, and I use this foundation to propose a playful research methodology. In turn, I use this methodology to outline the research design that I developed in order to explore my central research questions.

Whilst writing a chapter outlining methodological thoughts is very much part of ‘playing the game’ of the PhD thesis, it provides an opportunity to interrogate some of my own preconceptions around the philosophy of education and research, some of which have already been hinted at in previous chapters. Having both studied and taught a ‘traditional’ philosophy curriculum, John-Dewey-the-educator influenced me as a teacher before I discovered him as a philosopher, and in utilising his conception of pragmatism I acknowledge the specific contribution that his works have made to the field of education (Dewey, 1916; Dewey, 1938) without going into detail here on the pedagogical aspects of his theories.

At the same time, my focus on play as a mode of experiencing and interacting with the world and others necessarily impinges on the epistemological. Education is tied to epistemology because the question of what constitutes knowledge will determine what 'counts' as learning. Similarly, play raises epistemological questions of how we interact with the world. Play in turn has an impact on some of these fundamental questions, raising the issue of what happens when we take philosophy less seriously, and providing an impetus for transformation that goes far beyond games.

Given this epistemological foundation for play, it is unsurprising that my methodology reflects this. By the close of this chapter, I will have outlined methodological principles derived from design-based research, ethnography and critical pedagogy. These principles drive the rest of the study, and embrace play as a situated, social activity which has the potential to be a part of research as much as it is part of education.

#### **4.3 Dewey's pragmatism: Experience, communication, democracy (and play?)**

Frustrated with traditional philosophical arguments over if or how the external world can be known by individuals, Dewey's pragmatism shifted discussion towards the issue of how human beings, individually and collectively, come to construct meaning and knowledge through inquiry and negotiation. This necessitated a move away from 'correspondence' theories of truth whereby a proposition is true because it lines up with a particular state-of-affairs in the world. Instead pragmatism looks to 'warranted assertability' (Dewey, 1941). Assertions fulfil a performative function of being helpful in furthering our understanding, and are 'warranted' if they occur as a result of an ongoing process of inquiry (Fesmire, 2015: 90). Pragmatism is not concerned with propositional knowledge ('knowing that') but a more practical 'knowing-how', and what might otherwise have been considered propositional knowledge (i.e. facts) are treated as 'tools' in the process of inquiry in which

we all participate. This requires a very different epistemology that accentuates knowing and experiencing as active processes.

The word 'pragmatism' does not immediately associate itself with play, evoking a sense of seriousness or practicality. In political discourse, pragmatism is positioned in opposition to idealism, and often used to justify making unpopular or morally grey decisions which again are at odds with play's characteristic inefficiency (and potential subversiveness). Of course, this is in the common language sense of the word, but even in educational research, where there are unambiguous links to philosophical pragmatism, its role has tended towards demonstrating 'what works' in achieving educational goals and aims. Indeed, Dewey's own writings on play echo his contemporary educationalists and tend to concentrate on its role as a vital component of childhood education (Dewey, 1913; Dewey, 1916). These views are summarised by Dennis (1970), who concentrates on the transition between play and work and the spontaneous open-mindedness that play engenders in children.

Is there space for play in adulthood, and playful research, in pragmatism? For the sake of developing a methodology, it is not necessary to explain every aspect of Dewey's pragmatism. However, it is worth identifying three pertinent elements, namely *experience*, *communication* and *democracy*, and discussing how they might contribute to conceptions of play.

#### 4.3.1 Experience

Dewey was preoccupied by the failings of conventional epistemology, and so shifted the emphasis away from the subject-matter of experience ('the what') to the method of experiencing itself ('the how') (Dewey, 1929: 235). He focused on experience in action, transaction and interaction. We are 'always already 'in touch' with reality' (Biesta and Burbules, 2003: 10), and reality reveals itself through the activity of experiencing.

This is a transactional theory of knowledge in that it describes a complex process by which different subjects and objects interact to the extent that they are difficult to distinguish as individual parts of a whole system (Biesta and Burbules, 2003: 26). Transactions between beings and their environment constitute experience, and they change both:

...every experience enacted and undergone modifies the one who acts and undergoes, while this modification affects, whether we wish it or not, the quality of subsequent experiences. For it is a somewhat different person who enters into them. (Dewey, 1938: 35)

Treating experience as an active transactional process, Dewey encourages us to consider knowledge as the product of inquiry in which humans take part. This inquiry is practical (hence 'pragmatism'). We engage in it in order to bring ourselves into a state of equilibrium with the world and to 'solve' problematic situations in which our current experiences do not line up with previous ones.

Dewey's epistemological writing understandably concentrated on knowledge as a result of this process, but there are many other 'modes of experience' through which we can come to engage in transactions with the world. These modes include the ethical, the practical, and the aesthetic; Dewey did not believe that knowledge has an 'exclusive hold on reality' (Biesta and Burbules, 2003: 29). Given this, we can view play as another mode of experience, acknowledging that players often see the world in a different way to those who are not playing. Play can also be seen as a way of approaching the contingency of experience. If outcomes are uncertain and situations are unfamiliar, it can be as productive to look for fun as it is to look for knowledge, or morality, or beauty.

In this way, play contributes to the development of knowledge through its effect on habits, which can be useful in providing shortcuts in routine transactions, but become

unconscious, and slow down (or even prevent) inquiry unless they are confronted with new situations:

When [habits] operate in a situation to which they are not accustomed, in an unusual situation, a new adjustment is required. Hence there is shock, and an accompanying perception of dissolving and reforming meaning. (Dewey, 1929: 311)

Play, can provide these 'unusual situations'. It necessitates the breaking of habits, refreshing the process of inquiry, and creating new meanings. This is a familiar story for educators. We are frequently told to give our students new and exciting experiences and play can provide these. Treated as a mode of experience, though, play enters the process much earlier, changing the transactional activity of experiencing itself.

#### 4.3.2 Communication

Pragmatist inquiry is a collective exercise, which is why communication plays such a major role in Dewey's epistemology. Essential philosophical concepts such as mind, consciousness, thinking, language and trust only exist through (and because of) communication (Biesta, 2013: 27). This is because language and meaning, when understood as part of the transactional process of experiencing the world and each other, are tools to be used in transactions. We use language to make events meaningful, which in turn changes our reality. What we see as objects are 'events with meanings' (Dewey, 1929: 318) that are the outcome of a process of meaning-making rather than independent entities. Importantly, meaning is dependent on social interaction. Meanings are 'rules for using and interpreting things' (Dewey, 1929: 188).

The role of communication in this process comes from Dewey's assertion that human activity is essentially participative, and communication is more than the transmission of information. Using the in-depth example of two people passing a flower to one another, Dewey demonstrates the complex way in which meanings, symbols, objects

and behaviours interact to cause activity and change the world (Dewey, 1929: 178-182). Importantly, communication is not certain in this example. There is a degree of potential misinterpretation and indeterminacy which can only be overcome through negotiation and mutual anticipation of one other's actions. This example (like a game of *Mysterium*) acts as a microcosm of all communicative acts. Norms and conventions (including language) are 'standardised habit[s]... of social interaction' (Dewey, 1929: 190) which can help to overcome indeterminacy more easily.

This is the point at which play can be brought in, especially if it is seen as a rule-based social activity that necessarily involves others. Rules and meanings can be subjected to experimentation just as much as any other object in the realm of experience, 'imaginatively administered and manipulated' in order to 'copulate and breed new meanings' (Dewey, 1929: 194). Building on this, games and other playful activities can be seen as playful tools which contribute to, appropriate and disrupt the meaning-making process. As a process of communication, play can provide a way for mediation to occur and for new ideas to develop, even if this is simply through using familiar objects in unfamiliar ways and attaching new meanings to them.

#### 4.3.3 Democracy

It may seem strange to treat a concept as apparently complex as democracy as a foundational, epistemological one, but 'the political heart of Dewey's democratic ideal is inseparable from his theory of active, cooperative inquiry' (Fesmire, 2015: 154). If knowledge is developed in collaborative inquiry, then it stands to reason that the quality of social processes might affect our knowledge. For Dewey, democratic forms of cooperation are the best way to advance inquiry.

This is democracy in the most participatory sense of the word rather than just a form of government, 'an ideal, not a fact' (Fesmire, 2015: 156). In order to conduct

successful inquiry, it is necessary to enable individuals to approach their life experimentally, to try different things, and to communicate their own meanings as part of a process of negotiation. This extends even to identity and morality. One of the implications of Dewey's pragmatism is that even the self is socially constructed through interaction with other people. There is no essential 'I', and like everything else, we are only defined through our transactions with the world and each other, becoming that 'somewhat different person' every time we interact with others:

Because of converse, social give and take, various organic attitudes become an assemblage of persons engaged in converse, conferring with one another, exchanging distinctive experiences, listening to one another, over-hearing unwelcome remarks, accusing and excusing. (Dewey, 1929: 170)

This idea of playing different roles feeds into Dewey's democratic ideal, and play offers an opportunity to take on many roles at once without needing to be an expert or committing to 'serious' inquiry. Play becomes a site for social experimentation through which individuals can express themselves, and engage in the sort of critical activities that might transform habit-driven institutions.

#### 4.3.4 Drawing playful pragmatism together

Rorty's description of 'playful experimentation' from the start of this chapter draws everything together. Playful experimentation is itself a mode of experience, a way of understanding things and their connections to each other that may enable the individual to experience things in new ways. At the same time playful experimentation is a form of communication, in that it foregrounds the idea that inquiry relies upon interaction and negotiation to create meaning, and these meanings can be refreshed through play. Because of this, playful experimentation is also democratic; as experiments have an effect on the social world, participation in them becomes more vital. Playfulness encourages



participation to take place without the expertise that might be deemed necessary for more 'serious' methods.

### **From playful pragmatism to playful research methodology**

Pragmatism (especially Dewey's) is inexorably tied up with educational research precisely because education and research are interrelated exercises in coming to understand the world (Biesta and Burbules, 2003), and I have argued that play is part of doing this. Treating play as epistemological, therefore, should mean that my research methodology is similarly inspired by playfulness.

The underlying principle behind playful research methodology is to take part in activities for their own sake in the spirit of open-ended pragmatist experimentation, and to do this with an eye on the less 'serious' aspects of the context in which one is working. In taking this approach I am, to some extent, drawing upon a vein of scepticism of social science method that developed from Feyerabend's (1993) embrace of anarchism as a philosophy of science. Aligning with this idea, Phillips (1973) and Law (2004) both treat rigid method as a potential hindrance rather than a tool. Essentially it is a social habit that blocks inquiry. Phillips specifies play in particular as a way of dealing with this; for him play is an absence of rules that frees use from a 'heavy dependence' on method that 'enslaves' us as researchers (1973: 13).

I have already argued that, when considered from a situated and pragmatist perspective, play is just as rule-bound as any other activity, which is at odds with Phillips' argument. Law's (2004) approach is less dogmatic. Instead he argues that, because the world is vague and indefinite, methods should reflect this through being less automatic, slower, more reflective and vulnerable to change. In this spirit, playful methodology should not imply abandonment of rules, but instead a critical awareness of the rules one is

following, even when these are playful, and a willingness to change these in response to inquiry.

Having established that the rules might change, it is still worth considering what the 'rules' of playful research look like in the first place, and where they draw upon precedent from other methodologies. As my epistemology suggests, this was a pragmatic, narrative process that shifted over time as I engaged in conversation with these methodologies, and each of their influences shifted as the study went on. For example, critical pedagogy, as a method, ended up not playing a huge role in my data collection, but did return to my thoughts once I began to interpret and analyse data in a sense that was intended to construct new ways of 'playing' HE (see Chapter 8). Despite these shifts, I present these three methodologies in particular because they proved to be vital to understanding how playful research might work in theory before I developed it in practice.

#### 4.4.1 Design-based research

Structurally, my research resembles design-based research (DBR), a methodology that foregrounds the way in which educational research, theory and design are intertwined (The Design Based Research Collective, 2003; Anderson and Shattuck, 2012). DBR acts as a continuation of Dewey's pedagogical experiments in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, treating education as an applied research subject in which the aim of research is to discover new and improved ways of putting theory into practice.

DBR offers what appears to be the most 'complete' approach from which to draw influence simply because it prescribes an entire process of design for educational intervention (see Collins et al., 2004). Through an iterative cycle of design and redesign, DBR allows researchers to test how theories put into action function in authentic settings. In addition, DBR has an established overlap with many more technological approaches to educational design, including game-based learning (Barab and Squire, 2004). In this way,

DBR updates more 'traditional' research around education interventions by highlighting the 'user experience' of students and educators.

Compared to other research methodologies, DBR is still relatively young, and there is some debate over whether it constitutes a methodology, or merely a set of methods (Kelly, 2004). This disagreement, along with the vagueness of transferring DBR between contexts means that it can be treated as a 'Swiss army knife' which does a lot of things, but none of them particularly well (Dede, 2004: 106). It is vital to understand what one is doing (and not doing) *with* DBR rather than simply relying on it as a list of ingredients. In my case, it is the approach to researching, educating and designing as facets of the same activity that will be most useful. Some features of DBR that might be seen as essential are not present in this study. The iterative design process requires an ability to repeat interventions that might be outside the scope of a year-long study with just one group of students. More fundamentally, the idea of a designed intervention implies the existence of an end-goal or success criteria that are at odds with the open-endedness of play.

Whilst pragmatism can be construed as goal-oriented, pragmatist inquiries have an open-ended quality through which results might change what success actually means, especially when the context and the personal and emotional aspects of the research are foregrounded. It is less clear whether the results of this study are as transferable into other contexts as the strongest proponents of DBR would like.

#### 4.4.2 Ethnography and autoethnography

If DBR provides a structure for the overall design and trajectory of my research, then ethnography provides a structure for the data collection and analysis. Given a playful pragmatic approach, ethnography is apt because it is:

...based on the premise that social reality cannot be understood except through the rules which structure the relations between members of the group and which make

it possible for each to interpret the actions, gestures and words of the others.  
(Pring, 2004: 106)

To understand the rules at work within a community, ethnographers engage with four elements: the lived experiences of participants within their own worlds; the cultural tools (language, symbols, meanings) that help to mediate these experiences; analysis of this culture in light of theory; and social critique which links theory back to questions of value within the communities studied (Trongman et al., 2018). These elements are strongly aligned with pragmatist principles, and imply methods which can capture experiences, namely conversation with participants (i.e. interviews) and close observation of the contexts in which they live. They also imply the qualities of the data collected. Descriptions need to be 'thick' enough to illustrate behaviour in detail, and analysis needs to involve triangulation from a number of sources in order to ensure that these reflect participants' meanings. These act together to answer the question of what it is to be in a community, even when this community is new, changing or unconventional (as, for example, in the examples of ethnographies of video game participation outlined in my literature review).

Ethnography enables me to move away from 'results-focused' educational research and instead concentrate on the experiences of students as they engage in playful and non-playful activities. However, I also use my experiences as a participant in the same activities, which complicates the process and makes 'pure' observation more difficult. Indeed my own role in the whole project is complicated by my multiple roles, and this is something that I explore in Chapter 7. The more recent development of autoethnography (Reed-Danahay, 1997; Chang, 2008; Ellis et al., 2011), which takes an ethnographic approach to autobiographical writing, is useful here in that it allows me to turn the ethnographic lens upon myself, and to position my lived experiences with those of my students. Though it can be seen as a writing genre, autoethnography can be used as a form of triangulation, and provides an additional data-point in my analysis of the experiences of students. It also

allows me to address directly the way in which all of the roles that I play throughout the project (teacher, tutor, PhD student, researcher, player etc.) are in themselves worlds to be experienced.

Chang (2008) sees value in autoethnography's ability to connect self and others, and past and present, in ways that do not imply correlation or cause, but instead build a richer picture of context. In using it, I acknowledge that everything all the way back to my choice of this research topic depends upon my own experiences and that I need to consider my own ideas and attitudes as part of the process of coming to understand play and participation in HE. This is especially the case given the fact that I also play a role in the activities delivered to students. Autoethnography makes 'official' many of the conversations I would have with myself during regular professional practice, and turns these into data.

As with DBR, there is some debate over whether ethnography constitutes a methodology or a set of methods (Pole and Morrison, 2003). Again, my aim is to treat it as the latter in the knowledge that these methods are at least consistent with the playful pragmatism I have outlined, even if I am reluctant to label the study as an 'ethnography' overall. Whilst using ethnography in education settings breaks down and blurs the boundary between insider and outsider (Pole and Morrison, 2003: 25, 156-7), my role in the research as an educator seems central, especially as I am involved in the design of many of the rules being followed both in and out of the classroom. At the same time, in working with new students it could be argued that participants are entering 'my' world rather than me entering theirs. I need to acknowledge the power that I have in my role as one of the 'gatekeepers' to the university community, especially as this power is used actively to change the environment in which I am working. The central idea that I take away from ethnography is that the lived experiences of participants can form the basis of study, even if these are understood through a messier process than 'pure' researcher observation.

#### 4.4.3 Critical pedagogy

Reflecting this, my final major methodological influence is critical pedagogy (Freire, 1996; Giroux, 2017). Though not strictly speaking a methodology in its own right, this is used as part of classroom-based research to explore the ways in which power relationships are reproduced in educational settings. In addition, like DBR, critical pedagogy builds upon the idea that educational research changes the world through changing educational practice, and that this ability to change should be turned towards issues that affect the lives of students beyond education. Critical pedagogy differs in that it approaches educational 'problems' with radical transformation in mind, specifically change which will help to emancipate students from existing power relationships which may ensure that their voices are not heard. If DBR is about 'what works?', critical pedagogy is about 'what changes things for the better?' (including debate over what constitutes 'better').

The concept of *praxis* in critical pedagogy requires that both theory and practice are seen as necessary parts of the educating process. Students must engage in dialogue with educators in order to develop a critical understanding of their own identities and empower themselves (Darder et al., 2017). This is reminiscent of Dewey's idea of conversation leading to democracy, but perhaps with a more critical, transformative aspect built in.

In practice, this means a focus on student participation in both educational practice and educational research, which is apt given the centrality of the concept of participation to my project. Many of the more 'participatory' studies outlined in my literature review are critical in that participation transforms students' understandings in light of dominant discourses. Beyond education, the participatory aspect of many of the ethnographic studies of games I draw influence from comes specifically from a critical angle, highlighting the way in which critical pedagogy is tied up with other critical approaches like feminism and critical theory. Indeed participatory research, in which researchers' ideas are not privileged, and research participants play an active role in developing the concepts under

discussion, can be seen as more democratic than other forms of fieldwork (Cohen et al., 2018: 56).

Of course, 'participatory' is a relative term, my study does not involve students in every stage of the research process (especially as I begin to engage in interpretation and analysis). However, I have tried to include opportunities for students to direct research activities. Beyond encouraging active participation in the present, critical pedagogy's blend of activism and research ensures that one keeps an eye on the life of the research project after fieldwork is completed. Its influence here, then is perhaps more long-term; it encourages me to consider my position as a teacher/researcher working within the confines of a course over which I had very little control, and to consider how changing the wider system might transform things in the future. I need to be able to turn the critical lens on myself and my practice as well as the university as a whole.

#### 4.4.4 Methodological overlap

There are a number of overlaps between the three research methodologies from which I have drawn the most influence: a focus on the lived experiences of students; the participation of students in the research process; and the critical goal of enacting real change in the university. Whilst I would be uncomfortable labelling my research project as a 'pure' example of any of the methodologies outlined, they are useful in that they position my research among other projects, and suggest specific methods which fed into my research design.

#### **4.5 Playful research design**

Having established these influences, I can now outline the research approach that I took during this project and demonstrate what my conception of playful research looks like in practice. My methods of both data collection and data analysis try to capture the lived

experiences of students within the context of the foundation year, and the various forms of transaction that take place between individuals and their world, with an emphasis on the role that meaning-making plays in describing and shaping these experiences.

It is worth, at this point, restating the research questions that drove the project. Figure 4B outlines my sub-questions along with the methods of data collection, analysis and interpretation I used. Where specific methods line up with specific questions, I have tried to demonstrate this; however, as the project went on, I increasingly found that approaches to one question began to feed into the others. Of course, this should be

Research question	Data	Data collection method	Data analysis method
RQ1: How does play help us to understand student participation? (Chapter 6)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Interview data</li> <li>• Students' reflective writing</li> <li>• Teaching fieldnotes</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Group interviews</li> <li>• Observations</li> <li>• Reflective writing</li> </ul>	Thematic analysis (Boyatzis, 1998)
RQ2: How does a playful approach transform teaching and research in higher education? (Chapter 7)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Interview data</li> <li>• Teaching resources</li> <li>• Teaching fieldnotes</li> <li>• Reflective research journal</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Observations</li> <li>• Reflective writing</li> </ul>	Thematic analysis → Critical discourse analysis (via autoethnography)
RQ3: How might the idea of play transform our philosophical approach to education? (Chapter 8)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Fieldnotes</li> <li>• Reflective research journal</li> <li>• 'New' texts</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Group interviews</li> <li>• Observations</li> <li>• Reflective writing</li> <li>• Critical reading</li> </ul>	Critical discourse analysis (Gee, 2014)

Figure 4B: Research questions and methods



unsurprising given the fundamentals of my epistemology. Enquiry is open-ended and shifts in light of experience.

#### 4.5.1 Data collection methods

##### *Teaching observations*

My project focused on a year of teaching, so it made sense to begin my data collection in the classroom. I positioned myself as an observer in each of the 28 hour-long sessions I delivered, attempting to capture the experiences of students in the university classroom through examining their interactions with each other and the course I was delivering. To make the most of observations, I would go into teaching sessions pre-empting what I might want to examine, and jot down quick notes during sessions that I could return to later. I would develop these notes into more substantial, 'thicker' observations as soon as I could, but I would also return weeks later to examine them in light of following sessions. This would form the basis of the reflective writing I outline below.

The research question that I was particularly interested in when it came to observations was RQ2 (How does a playful approach transform teaching and research in higher education?), which is the question that most relates to teaching practice. However, observations formed the basis of many of the discussions I had with students around the other two questions.

In observing a large number of students across a year, I was aware of what I was not seeing as well as what I was seeing, and this in turn gave me new ideas of what to focus on during observations. The dual role of teaching and observing was challenging, and the 'teaching' side would often take precedence within the session simply because of the requirements of the role. Observations tended to take the form of vignettes, as small, impactful experiences which felt powerful at the time, or which suddenly clicked into place upon reflection. Sometimes noticing these would involve drawing upon my experience as

an educator and recognising when powerful learning was taking place; at other times, it would be my experiences as a game player which would point me towards a specific form of play happening.

### *Interviews*

Where my observations of teaching sessions provided me with data on the lived experiences of students across the year, interviews gave an opportunity to check these observations with students and to engage in the sort of meaning-making conversations that form a vital part of inquiry. Kvale (1996) sees the interview itself as a form of conversation that produces knowledge, and I went into interviews with the specific goal of not just understanding but developing and deepening my students' ideas.

My interviews involved students that I was teaching, either on the Foundations of Academic Practice course or as a personal tutor. Nine students from the cohort participated in interviews regularly (although participation tended to be sporadic in some cases), and as the year went on this group expanded to twelve as new participants signed up. Most of the student interviews were group interviews with at least two students, specifically because I wanted to capture conversations between students about the concepts we were examining. My approach in these interviews was to encourage students to compare experiences and meanings with each other, and to build upon discussions that had already started in teaching sessions. I also held several *ad hoc* individual interviews with students who I wanted to get 'on the record' if they had mentioned a specific idea during discussion in a teaching session.

As Chapter 5 will outline, most interviews took place between teaching sessions on campus. I went into interviews with some key topics for discussion within the fields of play and participation but beyond this, there was little formal structure as I wanted conversation to flow fairly freely. In some interviews, I would take in a game or a set of

images to spark initial discussion; in others we would reflect upon the teaching session that students had just taken part in. In this way I tried to inject some playfulness into what might have otherwise been fairly conventional conversations, again to encourage participation and to open up participants' understandings.

I recorded all interviews digitally, either with my laptop computer connected to a multi-directional microphone or with the voice recorder on my mobile phone for; the latter was particularly useful for *ad hoc* discussions with students. I took brief notes on discussions and key questions during interviews, but tried to concentrate primarily on discussion. Immediately following each interview, I would transcribe as a Word document. The transcription process made interviews easier to analyse, but also formed the first stage of interpretation in that I was able to immediately revisit questions and begin to think about themes that emerged. By the end of the academic year I had completed ten interview sessions totalling just under three and a half hours, which converted into 76 pages and over 34000 words of transcribed data.

### *Reflective writing*

Finally, reflective writing formed my third main set of data. My own reflective writing contributed to my use of autoethnography as it provided a set of data upon which to draw, but it also became a method in its own right as I began to analyse and interpret data from my teaching notes and observations. Here my major influence is hooks (1994). Though she does not position herself as an autoethnographic researcher *per se*, her writing reflects upon her experiences in and out of the classroom across her life, and this plays a major role in her ability to critically analyse her own practice and provide inspiration to others.

I kept a reflective journal across the year, and occasionally wrote longer pieces that built upon the shorter pieces I kept in this journal. Some of these pieces essentially became first-drafts of some of the chapters in this thesis, but by treating these drafts as data I was

better able to understand how my thinking changed over time. This broke down the somewhat artificial barrier between data collection and writing, though this has been reinstated somewhat by the strictures of the thesis itself.

Moon (2006) points out that journals focus on the subjective side of experience, both internal and external, and I saw this as a useful way to gain insight into my own experience. I gave myself time to write reflectively, but I also embraced shorter and more creative forms of reflective writing in order to understand my students' experiences and inject more playfulness into my research practice. For example, there are sketches, diagrams and slogans in my journal that point to particular ideas that I was preoccupied with as I began to read and explore other data. Examples of these appear in Chapter 8 in particular as examples of the way research crept into other activities.

I also wanted to encourage students to write reflectively for a number of reasons. At the front of many of their minds was the fact that their final assessment for the unit was an extended piece of reflective writing, so this provided them with a valuable opportunity to practice. Beyond this, though, I wanted to encourage critical reflective writing as way for students to think more deeply about some of the concepts that we had covered in teaching sessions (and interviews in some cases). Reflective writing tasks were intended to extend play out of the classroom and into the world around them, to the extent that they might not have even involved writing but drawing or capturing an image upon which to reflect. This, of course, provided me with a more varied set of data with which to understand students' experiences.

Though all students were given a reflective journal, in practice this method produced the fewest active participants and produced the smallest quantity of data; only three students agreed to share their data with me, and even then it was sporadically completed over the course of the year. The reasoning behind this will be explored further in Chapter 5. I did, however, arrange a substantial reflective writing session at the very end

of the year which encouraged twelve students to look back on the year and write in some detail about their experiences as foundation year students and as players, and how these had changed since they first started. This was a valuable way of triangulating many of the ideas I had captured through observation and interviews.

Across all of these data collection methods, I researched with a spirit of 'playful experimentation' and tried not to limit myself to activities that were in the original plan. This meant saying 'yes' to opportunities, improvising to some extent, as I tried to capture ideas from students if they inspired something. Several of my interviews with students were unscheduled, often sparked by a comment that was made during a teaching session that I wanted to pick up on 'in the moment' (or as close to the moment as I could get). Similarly, the content and structure of teaching sessions and interviews themselves often shifted through the participation of students. We would discuss new topics and follow the students' lead as we explored play and participation. I began to embrace this through using randomness and chance in interviews in order to heighten the sense of playful exploration. I pick up on many of these ideas in Chapter 7.

#### 4.5.2 Data analysis and interpretation

Data analysis and interpretation can be seen as two separate processes, with analysis organising descriptive data to raise questions, and interpretation going 'beyond' data to answer these questions (Wolcott, 1994). Having said this, analysis and interpretation inevitably feed upon each other as part of the process of inquiry. For example, I interpreted data for all three research questions by using the conceptual model of the magic circle as outlined in Chapter 3, but this interpretation depended upon using the model as thematic taxonomy for analysing and organising data from interviews with students. In this way, the model shaped the data to some extent before it was used for interpretation. Again, autoethnography was the driving force behind this. There is a 'balancing act' between

analysis and interpretation in this method that can be helped by starting to write early and frequently returning to writing in light of new data (Chang, 2008: 128-30)

Indeed it is worth making explicit that, although I have treated them separately for the sake of outlining my methods, it was difficult to separate even data collection and analysis/interpretation from each other. Pragmatist inquiry is an ongoing, active process of meaning-making with no beginning and no end, and this certainly came across as I collected and interpreted data. I started (informal) interpretation and analysis early in the year, and returned to students with the ideas that I had developed in order to check these against their conceptions and build an understanding that reflected and incorporated theirs. In many ways, this is the closest I got to DBR's concept of iteration. It was primarily my ideas and concepts that shifted through being tested in the field and in conversation with students. Although I had a conceptual model in mind from the start of the project, this constantly altered in light of data collection and analysis.

### *Thematic analysis*

For basic analysis of interview data and reflective writing in particular, I used thematic analysis to identify and categorise the key concepts that participants discussed in observations and interviews. This is a useful analytic technique because it allows one to recognise patterns in qualitative data and turn 'fuzzy' formulations into more precise understandings (Boyatzis, 1998). These patterns, or themes, fed into my wider analysis as I used them to develop arguments around RQ1 in particular. Whilst engaging in analysis I was aware that participants, as new students, were going on a journey of transformation. The themes provided an anchor for the story I was exploring, and allowed me to see conceptual understandings change over time.

My themes developed from the conceptual model of the magic circle, so to some extent were in place before coding took place. Having said this, I need to acknowledge that

my adoption of this model came from somewhere, especially when it is linked to my autoethnographic work. Given this, my coding sits in the middle of what Boyatzis calls 'deductive' and 'inductive' coding (1998: 30); it stems from concepts that are already in place, but which also develop in light of the data. Yet again, this seems apt given pragmatism's interactive epistemology.

Written and transcribed data was the most straightforward to code as it was immediately available and also the easiest to parse for meaning. I read through looking for specific words, highlighting these in different colours, then read through again examining the meanings of statements and again colour-coded in light of the themes from the magic circle. I repeatedly returned to this process, finding new insights each time in light of new data and observations from elsewhere. With each pass, my notes on each interview became more detailed and intricate. Indeed, this provided a method for the more difficult task of analysing different modes of data; this required a close reading of fieldnotes in order to analyse both the activities I described and my own description of them. This was not a one-way process, but interview data often started these conversations by suggesting a theme to examine in my fieldnotes.

This process of thematic analysis largely captured the semantic meaning of what students said, but I was also interested (out of interest, and for the sake of rigour) in understanding the more hidden meanings that we all brought to conversations. The shift from semantic to more latent understandings requires more interpretation, and it was this shift that required the addition of critical discourse analysis.

### *Critical discourse analysis*

If thematic analysis of interview data was about trying to understand students' conceptions, then critical discourse analysis (CDA) moved towards trying to understand where these conceptions came from. Through shifting analytic tools, I was able to relate

data back to wider questions around HE policy and practice, especially in light of the role that neoliberalism plays in shaping understandings of the concept of ‘participation’ in HE. This returned my research to some of the more ethical and political questions surrounding education raised by pragmatism and critical pedagogy. CDA provided a way for me to examine the ‘rules of the game’ in a critical way through linking the themes I had already identified with policy discourse.

CDA is transdisciplinary, and cuts across traditional subject boundaries (Fairclough, 2010: 5). It unlocked further ‘conversations’ between data that I had collected, and enabled me to consider the bounds of what ‘counted’ as data for my study. I began to treat things as ‘texts’ that I could not have before: the games I was playing as I was researching; the teaching activities that I took part in ‘outside’ of the research project; and even the books on methodology that I was reading to develop the design of the project. All of these contribute to discourse around participation, in particular in light of RQ2 and RQ3, which depended upon analysing my own position within the university as a teacher/student/player/researcher.

There are, of course, many different conceptions of what constitutes discourse, and therefore what CDA does (MacLure, 2003). I found Gee’s (2014) formulation particularly valuable because it begins with the situated use of language and its role in building meaning and identity, which links with pragmatist epistemology. Gee’s distinction between ‘big “D” Discourse’, which captures the language, symbols, tools and objects that constitute a recognisable social identity; and ‘little “D” discourse’ which means any instance of language more generally, is useful for exploring the way in which my participants’ identities developed over the year as they ‘became’ students. Further to this, the idea of ‘Big “C” Conversations’, which are recognisable public debates in which certain groups of people tend to be on particular sides, provided a way to interrogate language around HE from the point of view of both my students and my own perspective.



In practice, this meant returning to the themes that emerged from the data but ‘troubling’ them in light of other sources of data and other contexts. This took two main forms. Firstly, I looked for inconsistency; for statements that contradicted each other, or which were internally inconsistent. This worked across modes of data as I found inconsistencies between what students said in interviews and what they did in observations. Here, I was not looking to catch participants out but to understand the extent to which what they said transferred into practice, on the assumption that some ‘big D’ Discourse can affect actions even when we are unaware of this. Secondly, I looked for ‘big D’ Discourse more directly by specifically noting when participants evoked what are effectively ‘brand-names’. This was easy enough for games, but I also wanted to see where this came across in their discussions of education, so kept a close eye out for themes around education that felt like they had come from elsewhere; from their experiences of school, or their participation in an education course. I specifically identified these so that I could understand how students’ conceptions were linked to wider discourses.

This, of course, applied to me too. Part of the benefit of using CDA was the way in which it enabled me to turn the critical lens on my own practice. I could analyse my own teaching resources as a text, and examine them within the context of discourses around both play and education. Where had my ideas come from, and were they really doing what I thought they would? CDA explains the ordering of this whole thesis to some extent, in that I present my findings almost in the order in which I developed them, and things become more troubled as they go along (although I obviously revisit my earliest ideas throughout). Part of the story of the thesis is the way in which discourses from games studies begin to leak into my ideas about education.

Essentially, CDA continued the conversations that thematic analysis started, and I treated them as part of the same process rather than two different analysis methods. CDA allowed me to deepen my understanding of some of the latent ideas behind participants’

conceptions, and these were then made semantic by my reincorporation of them back into interview questions.

#### *How I use data*

In practice, this focus on the conversation between different sources of data has implications for the presentation of that data. Returning to the ideas of Law (2004), I want to recognise the vagueness and indeterminacy of much of what I encountered, but also my own role in using pragmatism not to tidy this up but to at least explore it. Interviews were conversations, so presenting interview data in isolation can miss not just the things that were said around these quotes but also the wider context of learning that was taking place around the interview itself, and the effect that the interview had on later conversations. In Chapter 6, I tend to use short, direct quotes from interviews as a starting point for discussion. As my argument develops, I hope that it is clear that I am not necessarily using these quotes as incontrovertible evidence for my arguments, but as examples of the sort of ideas that sparked a conversation between interview data and data from other sources. Later, Chapter 8, I make these links more explicit because this chapter takes a more deliberately holistic approach to the data; in a way the conversations have evolved to become more complex. Data is not there to 'prove' anything, but rather to spark further theoretical ideas which can be fed back into a wider conversation. This has obvious implications for the sort of conclusions I can make from my argument; they are tentative, reflective, and most importantly deeply situated in their original context.

#### **4.6 Ethics and the 'rules of research'**

Embracing research playfully might imply being flippant or cavalier about ethical rules, but given my grounding in pragmatism I felt comfortable playing within a consistent ethical framework which required that I consider the ethical implications of every activity I

undertook over the year. The latest best-practice guidelines from BERA (2018) frame research ethics in terms of an 'ethic of respect' for participants, and this was at the front of my mind throughout. More specifically, BERA states that educational researchers have specific responsibility around the areas of consent, transparency, participants' right to withdraw, incentives, harm, and privacy/data storage. I considered all six of these categories in designing and carrying out my research, and this was a key part of gaining ethical approval from my faculty before beginning my year in the field.

#### 4.6.1 Consent

All students on the foundation year received an information sheet about my PhD project during the first Foundations of Academic Practice session and I spent time talking them through it and taking questions so that they understood that my reflective practice would not impact upon their learning in a detrimental way. Those students who volunteered to participate in interviews received additional information and signed consent forms. I took to carrying a stack of these with me as the year went on in case students decided to join at the last minute. I was aware that there were potentially different levels of consent necessary for different students; the majority would essentially provide the context for my reflective practice (and would opt-in if I wanted to use their work as data), with only some actively participating in the research through interviews. Because of this, I made sure that as soon as a student crossed the threshold from 'passive' to 'active' participation, I reminded them of the information I had provided at the start of the year.

#### 4.6.2 Transparency

I informed students that I would answer any questions about the study, and that they could request any information or transcripts from me at any point. This open and honest attitude fed into my continuing relationship with participants in that I was clear with my ideas as they developed, and how this might impact on how their ideas might feed into my study.

This effective 'thinking out loud' fed into my sense of pragmatism in that it became a part of (and was informed by) wider conversations. My students knew I was doing research in general, but I was aware that my researching might not look like researching to others. In order to ensure that I was not 'tricking' students, or reducing them to interesting comments in fieldnotes, I would often be explicit about what I was doing and allow the research to interrupt proceedings. I would discuss the research questions I was trying to answer that week, or specifically mention that I wanted to remember something that had occurred in the classroom. Whilst it could be argued that this could in turn affect students' behaviour, this seems unavoidable in participatory research. Pragmatism also makes it clear that all of our interactions contribute to meaning-making, so by highlighting the role that my research played in my teaching I hoped to form a part of this conversation. If knowledge is socially constructed, it seems dishonest to hide one part of the construction process whilst actively encouraging other parts.

#### 4.6.3 The right to withdraw

Although this issue did not come up in practice, the consent forms that participants signed made it clear that they could stop participating at any time without giving a reason, and provided them with information on how to do so. The nature of the project also meant that I was able to check in with participants frequently, to make sure that they still understood the bounds of the project and their involvement, and that they were still willing to take part as part of their experiences of the year. In fact, whilst a few students did opt out of some interviews as the year went on, they became more involved in other activities, and eventually returned to take part in the final interview sessions.

#### 4.6.4 Incentives and harm

I did not offer any incentives for taking part in interview groups beyond suggesting that students with enthusiasm for research and education might find the experience

interesting. In a more fundamental way, I needed to ensure that those students who took part did not inadvertently or unfairly benefit from additional contact with me as their tutor. The foundation year cohort was small enough, and contact was frequent enough, that students and lecturers naturally became more familiar with each other as the year went on, and this occurred even for students who were not active participants. In general, my spirit of critical reflection was a vital part of ensuring that I did not show favouritism to students who participated in the project, but I was also assisted in this by teaching and learning structures that were already in place. For example, when it came to marking assignments second-marking and moderation processes ensured that the risks of unconscious bias towards particular students was minimised.

At the same time, it was difficult to think of any actual harm that might occur as a result of taking part in the study, and my own risk-assessment considered this a very low risk. However, I was aware of the time and effort that students would be required to put in to participating beyond the confines of the course, so I tried to make this as undistruptive as possible (see Chapter 5 for more on this). Beyond this, I ensured that those students who did not participate in interviews did not miss out on educational experiences that others were getting; all students experienced the same course and interviews were designed as a separate experience. As I will discuss in Chapter 7, this became increasingly challenging as the year went on, but I tried to maintain the sense that anything covered in interviews would not supersede activities in teaching sessions.

#### 4.6.5 Privacy and data storage

All participants were made aware (via discussion and consent forms) that interview data would be used as part of my PhD project as well as potential future publications. At the most basic logistical level, I stored all recordings and transcripts on a password-protected device which was backed up to a password-protected server. At a more personal level, and

in line with BERA guidance, I have anonymised all participants as far as possible (though given the institution and the course, and the reflexive and participatory nature of my study, there is an extent to which this is limited). I discuss my thinking about anonymisation further below.

#### 4.6.6 Honesty and openness

Beyond these guidelines, I developed an attitude of honesty and openness that tied into my own critical practice. My goal was to acknowledge that a 'perfect' sample was not possible in this context, but to try to find ways of making research valid and rigorous through reflective practice. I was engaging in what might be considered 'unhygienic', messy research in a live context, and these ethical principles allowed me to grasp onto something solid as I improvised in response to uncertainty elsewhere.

For example, I was aware that my sample was self-selecting and as such could not be entirely representative of an entire cohort. It was significantly more male as three of the four men in the cohort were in my tutorial group, and two of these became active participants, partially because they (perhaps fitting a 'masculine' stereotype) had prior interests in and experiences of videogames. I tried to mitigate against this in a number of ways. For a start, I used triangulation with observations and reflective writing, which gave me a fair grounding in how interview participants' attitudes fit within the rest of the cohort. Secondly, as the topic of discussion shifted from games and play towards participation I began to see more diversity of views emerge from even this small group. Students who had expressed an interest because of a prior interest in games now came for discussion of a wider range of topics. I was also aware that enthusiasm for taking part might change over time; I offered new points of entry for students who initially did not participate in order to further diversify my interview group. This helped me to defend against the natural way in which the most engaged students would be self-selecting in their engagement across the

board; these later students signed up out of genuine interest, not because they were new, keen students who would sign up for any activity.

I also constantly considered my own privilege as a teacher/researcher who had set the topic of study, and considered the ways in which this might be seen as an imposition of play on my students (especially as play might involve risks that I was willing to take but they were not). I was keen to confront my own biases, so during early discussion of students' conceptions of play I was deliberate in my attempt to examine their views and ensure that I was learning from them too. Even when these did not feed into eventual analysis they contributed to a sense that students were genuinely informing the direction of research. This was, ultimately, perhaps more of a pedagogical principle rather than a research one, but given my critical pedagogical approach it felt appropriate. Indeed, the particular position of these students as future educators (and educational researchers) remained at the front of my mind; I wanted to be transparent not just for the sake of ethics, but also to model the processes I was going through so that they could see how research might be done.

As a unifying example of this approach, I can point to my use of pseudonyms with students, which will help as I begin to write more about their views. The consent forms made it clear that data from interviews and observations would be anonymised, but as the research journey continued I began to feel that this may have interfered with my ability to authentically portray their contribution to the project. Using pseudonyms felt like a way around of this, and in later discussions I suggested to students that, as part of the process of participation in research, they choose their own pseudonyms. Their response was unexpected. They were as invested in the project as much as I was, in as much as they viewed it as *my* project. They were equally reluctant to speak *for* me as the researcher, and suggested that I needed to come up with names. Eventually, in discussion with one participant, we settled on the idea of using names from videogames to tie in with the theme

of the thesis. Overall, this conversation came down to the trusting relationships I had built with participants as both a researcher and educator. We understood the roles that we were playing the ways in which we affected each other, and solved problems through discussion. This, I hope, is indicative of the sort of 'ethic of respect' that is required of educational researchers.

#### **4.7 Conclusion: Ghosts with cards**

At the opening of this chapter, I used *Mysterium* to raise discussion of the transactional nature of human understanding because it forces players to create often clumsy metaphors to ensure that others understand. As part of the ongoing democratic, communicative experience of inquiry, we are all ghosts with decks of cards, some of which are more useful than others.

This chapter is, in effect, a set of cards that I am handing over to the reader. By evoking the legacy of Dewey, DBR, ethnography and critical pedagogy I position my playful research as 'in the spirit' of these, even if these labels do not capture everything the research involved. I hope to also convey that this problem is at the heart of my research questions; how do our conceptions of play and participation change when we take part in conversations? In this way, playful pragmatism explains the content of my research, the methods I used and the philosophical justification for the choices I have made.



## 5 – Context: The Foundation Year

### 5.1 Introduction



Figure 5A: Part of an 'official' Metal Gear timeline

Some games are difficult to play because they involve complex physical movements, or mastery of challenging rulesets. Others are difficult to play because they do not make any sense to newcomers. Videogames franchises are now so firmly established that, like series of novels or long-running TV soap operas, coming in halfway can be daunting.

Take, for example, *Metal Gear Solid V: The Phantom Pain* (Konami, 2015). Though its name suggests otherwise, it is the eighteenth game in the *Metal Gear* series, which started in 1987 (in fact, it is unclear whether the 'V' in the title is intended as a Roman numeral '5' or a capital letter, or both). The plot of this 'tactical espionage action' series spans over a hundred years of alternate global history, centred around the character of Snake and his various sons, clones and doppelgängers, all of whom go by variations on the

same name. Set in 1984, chronologically between the fifteenth and the first games, *The Phantom Pain's* protagonist is initially assumed by the player to be the villain of the first game, and whilst this is technically true, in a twist ending it is revealed that this particular character is *not* the same character that appears in other games but rather a body-double intended to confuse enemies (and the player).

Needless to say, confusion is a common by-product of playing a *Metal Gear* game. Even as a fan of the series, being asked to recall details from a game that came out almost three decades ago means I often refer back to fan-built wikis and timelines in order to get the facts straight every time I get to another scene which dumps a tonne of exposition in one go. Of course, it is simple enough to play the game without this information. It is a thrilling and enjoyable game even if you simply play the free-standing spying missions. However, to be a true *player* of the game, one really has to immerse oneself in thirty-years' worth of backstory.

This chapter is an academic year's worth of backstory offered as background for some of the chapters which follow. In an ideal world, it would take the form of a hyperlinked wiki or timeline that could be referred back to as I begin to analyse the year, but I hope that being able to flick back to this chapter for context will help the reader to understand where my teaching and research activities stood. Later on I will reflect upon and analyse these activities, but for now it is worth attempting a fairly neutral pass at them just to provide contextual detail that may prove useful later on.

## **5.2 Manchester Metropolitan University**

Manchester Metropolitan University (MMU) is a former polytechnic, and became a university in 1992. According to the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA), in 2017/18 it had just over 33 000 students enrolled, making it the eighth largest HE institution in the

UK (HESA, 2019). Its campus is in central Manchester (a second campus in Crewe was in the process of being closed down as this study took place).

MMU recruits the largest number of undergraduate students from the state sector (MMU, 2019a: 1), and it is the country's second largest recruiter of young full-time undergraduates from low-participation neighbourhoods (LPN). This figure was affected by the closure of the Crewe campus, which attracted a higher proportion of LPN students than Manchester (MMU, 2019a: 1). Even given this change, around half of its full-time home undergraduates are first-generation. The proportion of students progressing from vocational qualifications has also been increasing in recent years (MMU 2019a: 2).

MMU is above sector averages for recruitment of ethnic minority students. 56.7% of students are female, which is largely in line with sector averages (although Education as a subject has an even higher proportion of women than this). The university recruits an above average proportion of disabled students, including a large proportion with specific learning difficulties (MMU, 2019b).

Retention and progression from Level 4 to Level 5 remain below both national averages and benchmarks, and this problem is exacerbated for those students in the groups mentioned above (MMU, 2019a). For this reason, MMU is working on programmes like the Foundation Year to better prepare these students for progression and academic success (MMU, 2017).

### **5.3 The foundation year**

I have worked in education for over a decade, since I first started as a Widening Participation Intern whilst studying for my MA. Though I eventually qualified as a history teacher, the majority of my working-life prior to starting this project was focused on one-off interventions with older students across a number of subjects. These included real-world projects, inter-school competitions and creative work with external stakeholders like

local councils and small businesses. It is fair to say that my past approach to education has not been wedded to the classroom or the textbook, but it was always rooted in a sense of 'creative compliance' that linked all of these innovative activities back to the students' and schools' core aims.

As I was a newcomer to the university, my access to teaching work was arranged by my PhD supervisors in collaboration with colleagues in the Education faculty. Whilst it is not unusual to lecture while studying for a PhD, my specific focus on (widening) participation, and my preference for an environment in which I could design and deliver new resources meant that the foundation degree course in Education stuck out as providing the opportunities I needed for my research.

Whilst the idea of foundation degrees is not a new one, the foundation degree in Education at MMU is a relatively recent addition to the range of options available to students (MMU, 2019). Foundation degree programmes are designed as a route into university for students who would not otherwise have the capacity to attend, either because they lack the required grades or they have been outside of the education system for long enough that they need a new entry point. In some cases, both of these may apply, especially for those who are switching into undergraduate study having been employed for several years.

In this way, foundation degrees are connected to the wider social justice project discussed earlier in my literature review, and can be considered part of the suite of widening participation strategies that universities employ to engage 'non-traditional' students in HE. The foundation degree in Education is a quintessential example of this. Its entry criteria are lower than a standard degree (they require the equivalent of 80 UCAS points, as opposed to the 104-112 required for a full degree, and lower grades in GCSE English), but those who complete the course are guaranteed a place on one of the

Education faculty's full degree programmes in Education or Early Years Studies. In this way, it provides a lower barrier for entry to mainstream degree courses.

The cohort I worked with generally reflected this spirit of social justice. It encompassed international students with English as an additional language, mature students who were re-entering education having left after school, and a fairly locally-based group of school-leavers who did not get the required grades for full degree courses and who had chosen to spend an additional year making up for this. Many of these younger students still lived at home with their parents in Greater Manchester, so automatically had a different experience to those who had moved to Manchester to study. The programme was fairly diverse in terms of age and ethnicity, but like many Education and Early Years programmes it was predominantly female. There were just four men on the course in a cohort of around eighty.

Teaching on the course was designed to help this cohort develop the skills required for undergraduate study, reflecting, to some extent, the 'deficit-correcting' approach to widening participation discussed in the literature review. At the same time, spending an extra year on developing these skills provides the opportunity for teaching and learning to happen more slowly, and to be more focused on the individual students' needs. In this way, the foundation degree programme practices what it preaches with regard to educational diversity and innovation. Structurally, this meant that students studied four equally-weighted units which are designed to introduce educational ideas and prepare them for further study on either Education or Early Years degree programmes. These points summarise information taken from course information on the university website (MMU, 2019).

- Education Community and Diversity (ECD) examined the role of educational institutions within society, in particular around issues of identity, inequality and division and how these increase the complexity of education. This was the most

sociological of the units, and tended to focus on connecting educational questions with broader political and social issues. It was assessed through a group presentation on organisations that work with disadvantaged groups of young people in formal and informal settings, and an essay which examined educational diversity as portrayed in the media.

- The Learning Process (LP), which took a more theoretical viewpoint of learning as a developmental process, in both formal and informal settings. As students were likely to go into a number of different courses, it examined learning over the course of a lifecourse from infancy to adulthood, and students were encouraged to use themselves as an example of learning as they reflected on past experiences. This unit was assessed via a group presentation reflecting on students' own prior experiences of education and how they relate to theory, and an essay on lifecourse theories.
- EdLab: Practice and Innovation was a strand of a wider programme in the Education Faculty which is accessed by students across Education degree programmes. EdLab presented 'live' problems to students and tasked them with working on solving these problems through enterprise and innovation. These included work with local schools, outreach activities within the university and design projects that were tested out in the classroom with fellow students. Along with centrally organised projects, students were also encouraged to identify their own opportunities to work on real projects beyond the course and the campus. This unit was assessed through a portfolio reflecting on the effectiveness of three or four projects over the course of the year, and a creative piece which demonstrated one of these projects in more detail for a general audience.
- Foundations of Academic Practice (FoAP), which was designed as the 'core' of the year and which explicitly built students' academic skills such as research, reading,

writing, critical thinking and reflective practice. As the year went on, this moved away from taught sessions on skills and more towards workshops in which students could bring work from other units in order to improve drafts. The idea behind this unit is that it trained students up in the non-subject-specific aspects of being a student, so that whatever degree programme they moved on to, they would have first-hand experience of the skills required to participate. This unit was assessed by another portfolio, which in contrast to the EdLab one was longer and more personally reflective, and focused on individual students' academic and career goals.

All of the units are creative and reflective, building a sense of metacognition in students. They are also designed to build confidence and group-work skills. On top of this, all units contain opportunities for students to use their own educational experiences as part of their study, simultaneously positioning them as life-long learners and helping them to reframe any negative experiences of education within the context in which they occurred and challenge their preconceptions. Of course, students also get graded on this type of work specifically (as opposed to entirely theoretical or text-based work). In this way, the programme both encourages and attaches a literal value to some of the characteristics that might be assumed or taken for granted in more 'typical' undergraduates, and gives students a way in and an incentive to practice these behaviours.

Students were also divided into four tutorial groups, each of which was assigned a personal tutor. Again, in an attempt to offer more structure and support than a conventional degree, students would meet in groups with these tutors each week in order to discuss progress on assignments and their wellbeing. Importantly, personal tutors would mark all of the assignments produced by their groups, regardless of who taught them for

each topic. This allowed tutors to gain a better understanding of each student's academic and personal needs as the year went on.

#### 5.4 My teaching practice

I taught half of the cohort on the Foundations of Academic Practice unit and acted as personal tutor to one of the four tutor groups (which gave me contact with roughly three-quarters of the cohort on a weekly basis). I shared the planning and preparation for FoAP with a colleague, and also contributed to EdLab sessions in the second half of the year when another colleague went on maternity leave.

For the first half of the year of FoAP, my colleague and I alternated weeks of planning, delivering each other's resources to our own groups. For my Thursdays, I planned a series of sessions on 'playful research tools', which essentially provided an opportunity for students to practice academic skills such as creativity, exploration, collaboration and

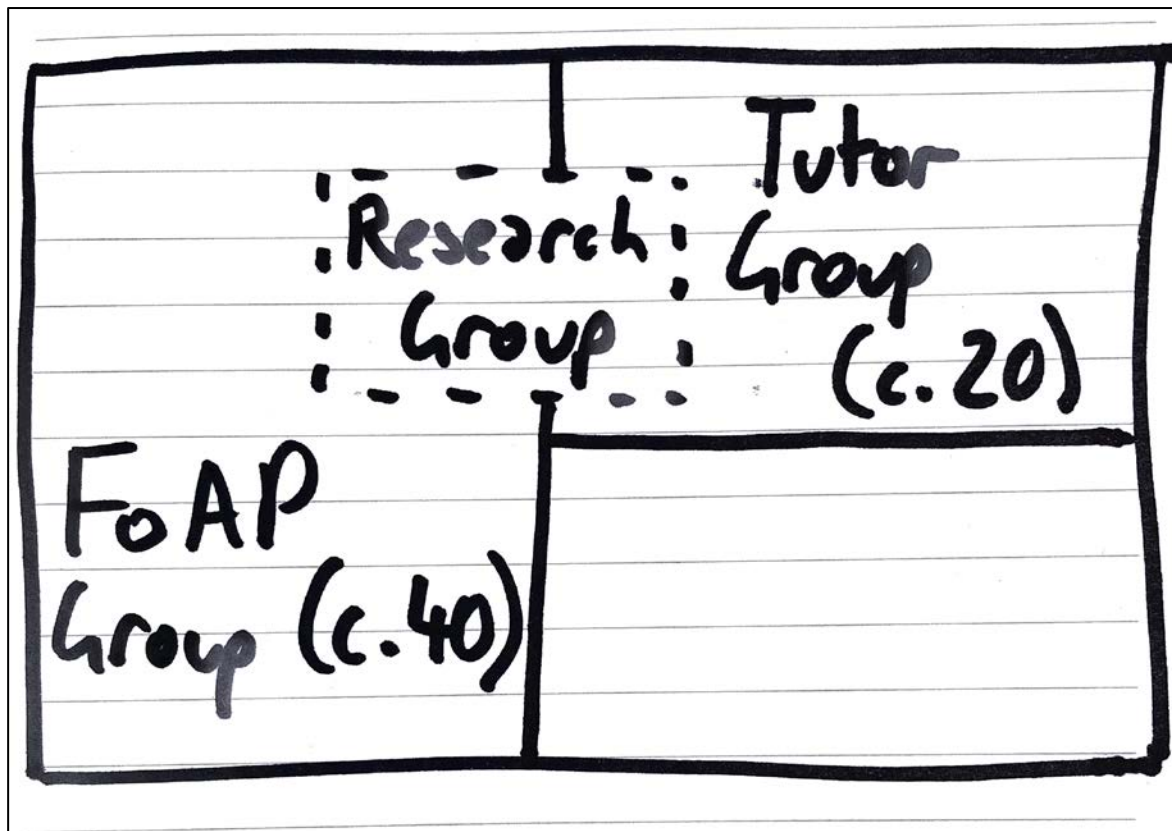


Figure 5C: The foundation year cohort



investigation through playful activities. The format for these sessions would generally involve a discussion of the skill in question, a playful activity focusing on this theme, and then reflection on this activity. For example, in a session on 'playful creativity' we discussed the ways in which creativity is necessary in teaching, then I used Lego to engaged students in a playful design task, and in a session on 'playful exploration' we thought about the different ways that we experience educational spaces before exploring the building with playful tasks influenced by Keri Smith (2011). An example of the running order for these sorts of activities is in Figure 5C. Students got used to the idea of alternating between playful and 'regular' weeks. However, reflecting the ethos of the course, the general teaching approach was fairly playful and participatory anyway. Playful sessions would usually tie into the next week's session, which would deepen these skills through applied examples and bring things back to how students might use them throughout the year, whilst encouraging them to continue to use their playful tools.

I also gave each student a 'playful research journal' and set challenges for them to complete between sessions. This met with mixed success as my analysis chapters will discuss. The idea behind these challenges was to provide further opportunities for students to engage in playful reflection between sessions, which would prepare them better for their assessed reflective writing pieces. My other motivation for this was to consider the ways in which students might play 'outside' of my control. I wanted to give them these provocations and let them take them away to interpret themselves. These would often build upon something we had already covered in the session, but would do so in an abstract way. For example, after the session on reflection I challenged students to take a picture that featured as many reflections as possible, and then to write reflectively on what it said to them about education. These sorts of tasks often involved more abstract thinking, and

Introduction	Jobs for the Future – What will work look like in thirty years?
Theory Discussion	What is creativity?  Divergent and convergent thinking
Playful Task	Use Lego to create an invention to fix an educational issue.  Work on your own and then try to combine your idea with others by combining models and explaining your invention's new function.
Reflective Discussion	Link back to Jobs for the Future – Why is creativity important?  How have you demonstrated divergent and convergent thinking today?
Playful Journal Task	Make a frame - this can be a piece of paper, a Lego model or even your fingers.  Three times this week - use your frame to look at the world. Reflect on this.

*Figure 5C: An example of a 'playful research tool' session*

pushed students beyond what was covered in sessions. Indeed, this may be part of the reason why so many students treated them as optional.

In the second half of the year, my colleague and I shifted tactics and embedded playful activities across all sessions, which involved more collaborative planning but made it easier to tie the whole course together. This also reflected that, as students got closer to their final assessments, many of them wanted to 'opt-in' to playful activities rather than have them at the core of sessions. In general, this way of doing things meant that no one session was entirely playful, but that opportunities for playfulness occurred throughout. For example, the homework task in Figure 5D gives a fairly 'conventional' homework

## Homework - Your Research Journals



A choice!

Use different voices to write reflectively on this question:

What is the easiest activity you've done on the Foundation course this year? What is the most difficult activity you've done on the Foundation course this year?

OR

Take an envelope and open it on Monday.

*Figure 5D: An optional playful task from late in the year*

that extended the work we had done on reflective writing in class, but I also gave students the option of taking a 'mystery envelope' that replaced that task with something more playful (even in terms of how it was presented) that involved using different reflective voices to communicate with others outside of university. The instructions they were given for this are in Figure 5D.

By this point (again, as my analysis chapters will discuss) my general research focus had shifted so I was less concerned with covering play in sessions and more interested in examining spontaneous moments that might be seen as playful. The smaller group of students who participated in interviews maintained some of the more playful activities as they prepared their final assessments, even though many of them had more regular contact with my colleague who taught them for FoAP.

Having said this, our teaching practice as a team was fairly flexible. It was not uncommon for me to visit classrooms of colleagues in order to deliver an activity or simply take part in the session. The most significant example of this was when I effectively took over a three-week EdLab project in which students were tasked with adapting existing commercial tabletop games to deliver educational activities. In the first of these sessions I

ran an interactive session covering the theory behind games-based learning and introduced the project brief. In the second, we played and critiqued an existing educational adaptation of a board game developed by colleagues (Wake and Illingworth, 2018), before students went away with their own games to adapt over a reading week. Students then playtested and critiqued each other's adaptations the final session. This run of sessions provided me with an opportunity to use some more 'traditional' games-based learning techniques.

## Mini-Project: Using Board Games in the Classroom

Your challenge: Adapt existing analogue (board/card) games for use in teaching a topic to an audience of primary age children.

You can choose your own game but we'd recommend using one of the games we will provide.

Next week: Looking at an existing educational adaptation  
After reading week: Presenting and playing each others ideas

## Mini-Project: Using Board Games in the Classroom

Our games:

- **Dixit** - imagination, creativity, teamwork
- **Uno** - pattern recognition, planning, bluffing
- **Dobble** - speed, competition, pattern recognition
- **Skull** - bluffing, deduction

You'll need to learn how to play the game before you can adapt it - this is your homework for the next week!

Youtube: 'How its played'



The image displays four board game covers arranged in a 2x2 grid. Top-left: Dixit, featuring a colorful landscape with a sun and a small boat. Top-right: Dobble, showing a purple hand with a single eye. Bottom-left: Uno, a red card with the word 'UNO' and a colorful card. Bottom-right: Skull, featuring a colorful skull with floral patterns.

Figure 5E: Slides from the EdLab game-based learning project

In sum, this is what a typical week looked like from the perspective of students. The areas shaded grey indicate sessions in which I had teaching responsibility for a group of students, with EdLab coming into play early in the second term:

	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
0900					
1000	The Learning Process		EdLab	FoAP	
1100					
1200					
1300	ECD				
1400					Tutorial
1500					

*Figure 5F – A typical foundation year student timetable*

## 5.5 Researching with students

Within this teaching context I also needed to coordinate the more student-focused aspects of my research. Given students' timetables, it made the most sense to hold interviews between sessions on Thursdays. Because many students travelled in from home in order to attend, on Thursdays it was not uncommon for them to spend their time between sessions on campus. At the very least, Thursdays were the day when I was most likely to bump into a group of students at a loose end. My earliest group interviews had long lead-in times as I tried to arrange times and venues in advance, but in the end I found it much more fruitful to remain flexible and check-in with students frequently to see if they were free to discuss a topic for half-an-hour. Because of this, membership of my research group was fluid, and I never met with exactly the same group of students twice for an interview. Having said this, the majority of the research participants came from my tutor group, and

fewer came from the larger group that I taught for FoAP. I put this down to the pastoral relationship I developed with students in my tutor group; there was certainly more of a sense of familiarity, and to some extent they seemed more personally invested in my PhD project because we would have the time and space to discuss it informally in tutorial sessions.

The details of how I engaged students and the mechanics of interviews are outlined in Chapter 4, so I will not repeat them here. It is worth reiterating, though, that as the year went on this sense of informality and *ad hoc* arrangements around interviews was vital to capturing some of the spontaneous aspects of students' participation. It also made it easier for students to participate in the research project (or choose not to in some cases). It lowered the stakes, but also allowed for students to have a real personal connection to what was happening that often drove their continued participation. This sense of informality proved so central to my later autoethnographic analysis (see Chapters 7 and 8) that it becomes a vital part of the context in which I was working.

Early interviews centred on students' prior experiences of play, and effectively acted as extensions of some of conversations that took place in the FoAP sessions that introduced the idea of playful research. These early sessions were intended to address some of my initial research questions around the use of games and play in education settings with a cohort like this one. As I became more interested in capturing students' experiences more generally, interviews shifted away from addressing questions of play and more towards questions of participation, although students' early grounding in play concepts meant that they were able to make connections when I used playful techniques and metaphors.

At the very end of the year, as students worked on their final assessments for FoAP and EdLab, I ran a reflective writing session that was intended to capture some of the valuable thinking that they were doing in these pieces without insisting that they submit

them as research materials. This session took place immediately after an EdLab assessment workshop, and I prepared reflection sheets which asked questions about four of the key areas that my research had covered: experience of the foundation year; participation in education; play; and 'becoming' a student. Beyond this, I gave students space to write any further thoughts or comments that they had. This session attracted ten students, two of whom had not been involved in research before, and provided an additional source of data as I began to draw my analysis together.

### **5.6 Conclusion: Idiosyncrasies and improvisation**

Looking back at the timeline of the year (which can be seen in the Appendix), I can see the ways in which I tried to incorporate play and research into a structure I had inherited from my colleagues and predecessors, and the ways in which improvisation and opportunism was a necessary part of this. I will reflect upon this further in my analysis in Chapter 7. The key takeaway from this chapter is that my research took place in a context with some idiosyncratic features, and that my own teaching added to these idiosyncrasies. Any analysis that I undertake will need to accommodate and reflect upon these idiosyncrasies as well as the aspects that happened by deliberate design. Indeed, I will consider the implications of this for the applicability of my ideas elsewhere in the final two chapters of the thesis.

## 6 – The students: Playstyles

### 6.1 Introduction

I think university is like a game because the end goal is to get the degree, that's when you win, I guess, with university. And, like, during the game you can either, like, do it by yourself or you can work with other people and encourage them and build them up. I don't think anyone in this game are [sic] trying to bring people down and hinder them from getting a degree, I mean, I don't... see that happen. We're all trying to build each other up or just do it by ourselves to reach this one same end goal. (Arthur, Interview, 8<sup>th</sup> March 2018)

This chapter addresses the first of my research questions: how does play help us to understand student participation? The introductory quote above, taken from an interview with a student, hints at my answer. I have asked Arthur, who is a fan of videogames, to talk about the connection between university and games. He considers the idea that there are many different ways to 'play the game' of being at university in order to achieve one's goals. Importantly, this idea came from a group interview in which students rolled dice in order to construct questions ('How is university like...' / '...a game'), and it is clear that he considers the role that others have to play in the game of university. This also hints at a sense of confusion to some extent. Arthur seems driven by getting his degree, but there are also opportunities for cooperation that can be grasped or ignored, and the imagined prospect of hindering other people that is not acted upon. How does a student choose to participate given these options?

In a way, Arthur's thought here is a model of this chapter's argument as I use play to understand student participation. My literature review established that participatory approaches to games take seriously the analysis of the ways in which people play them. Here, I apply this line of thought to participation in HE through my work with foundation



year students. Drawing a metaphor from games studies, I outline an idea of five ‘playstyles’ that reflect different modes of participation in university education.

In discussing these playstyles, I identify the ways in which they emerge from and are co-constructed by students, others and ‘rules of the game’ in a specific context, which can be understood in terms of the magic circle of participation. Beyond this, I build upon what is hinted at by Arthur above; playstyles are not exclusive, but can be held simultaneously in often contradictory or paradoxical ways. Playstyles are not a way to categorise students. Instead I want to capture the fluidity with which their participation moves and shift between playstyles in response to changing relationships with the game being played. The final part of my argument in this chapter is that this movement is itself a form of learning, even when it might be viewed negatively by conventional ways of understanding formal education. The upshot of this is that educators may not necessarily design *for* specific playstyles but rather anticipate that any activity they design will be played in many different ways.

My literature review also established that participation and play are different things, though they are related. In evoking the word ‘playstyle’, I want to capture the idea that students participate in many different ways, even when they are not playing. The term reflects the genealogy of the ideas that I am using, whilst acknowledging and taking seriously the idea that we can read HE as a game that is played. It is essentially a pithier way of summarising this than a phrase like ‘participation style’, and makes the metaphor of play central to discussion of participation in education. In this way, play helps us to understand participation not through different practice but through different ways of thinking.

Data in this chapter come primarily from the interviews I held with students during the year in which I was teaching them, and also from observations of this teaching. The conceptual model of the magic circle of participation emerged from my reading at the same

time as these activities were happening, and this eventually unlocked the idea of playstyles. In this way, and as I suggested in my methodology, the idea of playstyles is not a 'pure' product of revisiting interview and observation data, but rather was a product of the pragmatist conversational aspect of interviews. By enabling students to talk freely, we went into conversational areas we would not have otherwise covered, and similarly, my freedom to bring a nascent analytical idea back to them for discussion and testing helped the sense of playstyles to evolve. For example, mid-way through the year I discussed the idea of being 'chaotic' or 'lawful' with students, which I recognise now as an early iteration of the way in which playstyles link to the 'rules of the game'. Indeed, there is something in the fact that many of these conversations started as being about games, but shifted towards other topics. I am interested in the idea that a conversation about one thing can also be a conversation about another thing through the way in which participants share meanings with one another. Whilst I started seeing conversations about games as a way in to deeper discussion, they in fact contribute to the developing model by allowing me to see the connections that others make.

This way of thinking about these conversations goes some way to mitigating against the notion that individual playstyles might be 'cherry-picked'; whilst I draw upon discussions that occurred after the idea had emerged, I also go back to earlier in the year to look for signs of playstyles at work. At the same time, the central idea from my analysis that there may be many other playstyles out there also helps here. Though I limit my discussion to five playstyles that I recognised in my students' discussions and interactions, this list is not exhaustive and I am sure that the data would provide more if subjected to further scrutiny and if I had the space required to discuss this.

Whilst considering this, it is worth mentioning the story of how the playstyles emerged from the data as it speaks to the difference between students' idealised notions of university and how they actually participated. As I mention below, my earliest

conceptions (around the time of my initial coding) were solely in terms of the rules of the game, and were basically reducible to 'following the rules' or 'not following the rules'. When I considered these themes in terms of the magic circle, and discussed with students, these categories eventually became 'playing to win' and 'counterplay' respectively. Returning to older data to check this, though, it was clear that there was *something* missing between these two more 'pure' playstyles that better captured what many of my students were actually saying and doing. Returning to the magic circle model, especially the overlap between circles and the role of others, enabled me to analyse interview data further and develop 'playing for fun' and 'playing the game' which, I will argue, were far more descriptive of what students actually did when they participated. Thus, my data analysis was a dynamic process that was informed by conversation with students, data and my own previous conceptions.

Playstyles emerged as concepts in a particular order, but I have deliberately not presented this data chronologically as I want to avoid the suggestion that there is a necessary, logical and omnidirectional progression between different playstyles. The order in which I present the playstyles has some sense to it in that it illustrates the ways in which the magic circle might shift, but again I do not want to give the impression that this shift is inevitable. I hope that this also further illustrates that data are not cherry-picked. Each playstyle is evidenced by extracts from conversations with students and my observations of students' participation. Where relevant, I use pseudonyms to identify particular students and how their attitudes shifted, but in general I use quotes from individual students to summarise and exemplify wider points made during interviews. As I mentioned in Chapter 4, these individual quotes are not presented as 'proof', but as sparks for further thought.

Ultimately, this chapter is an attempt to understand what students like Arthur mean when they talk about participation in this way, and what it means to actually participate in this way. Arthur's list of ways of participating might initially appear to be a menu from

which to choose, but I will demonstrate that students may well opt for the entire menu in a paradoxical or contradictory way, and that this is actually less of a choice and more of a product of contextual and social processes, and might actually be evidence of learning taking place.

## **6.2 Playstyles**

Obviously I don't want to run round and scream. But I'd rather... I dunno... I'd rather play Twister than Monopoly. (Cassandra, Interview, 23<sup>rd</sup> November 2017)

As I have mentioned previously, my earliest discussions in interviews with students centred primarily on games and play. This was a way into conversation about wider topics, but also a way for me to confront my own preconceptions and how they might differ from those of my students. The most common ideas that emerged from these discussions were students' positive and negative understandings of games, which often lined up with common discourses in academic literature and the media (see Boyle et al., 2016). They discussed games and play as sites for communication, fun and imagination, but also their potential for being difficult to learn, or encouraging negative emotions and actions. More importantly, it was clear from these discussions that even students who did not class themselves as experienced gamers shared a sense of familiarity with play, perhaps even to the extent that it is a fairly mundane activity.

It was clear from this that we cannot assume that students will all have the same relationship to play and games (in and out of education contexts). Though these discussions ended up outside of the scope of my final research questions, they were vital because they provided the initial spark for what follows. They raise the idea that different people have different approaches to playing games, and that these approaches can be described in detail. This may seem self-evident, but this issue is ultimately at the heart of academic

games studies which explore the different ways in which people play. I take inspiration from this approach to gameplay in order to analyse the concept of educational participation more generally.

Many writers in the field of games studies have focused on the 'playstyle' of players when they play a game, notably Bartle (1996), who divided players of early Multi-User Dungeons (MUDs) into 'achievers', 'socialisers', 'explorers' and 'killers' based on the way in which they interacted with the game they were playing. For Bartle, this distinction comes down to whether players 'act' or 'interact' (i.e. whether they are interested in 'doing things' to the game or have the game do things to them), and on whether this is 'world-orientated' or 'player-orientated' (i.e. whether players act or interact primarily with the world or with other players). Bartle also uses this taxonomy to argue for games design that balances the types of player so that they are in equilibrium with each other, and their dynamics contribute to an enjoyable experience for all. This discussion has led to many other taxonomies of 'playstyles', especially with regard to the design of games, and these sometimes bleed into the culture surrounding games. For example, De Albuquerque and Fialho (2015) develop the idea of 'player profiles' which incorporate not just how players interact with different genres of game but also the 'paradoxical nature of fun' (p. 34) through which an aspect that is fun for one person is off-putting or distracting for others (or even the same person later in life). Again, these profiles can be used in the design of future games, but they might also be valuable for understanding existing ones.

I examine student participation in a similar way, and by framing participation using play I begin to identify a number of ways in which participation can be understood differently. Ultimately each of these modes of participation can be understood in terms of the 'magic circle' model, and I will give some idea of how this might work. In each case, it is my ultimate aim to understand a playstyle in terms of the 'rules of the game' that the student is following and the way in which they interact with other players given this

context. Importantly, reflecting De Albuquerque and Fialho's 'player profiles', I do not see these playstyles as fixed; they shift in response to changing circumstances and some of the trajectories of participation over the year can be understood in terms of a change in playstyle.

The conceptual framework of the magic circle is useful here because it enables us to frame these playstyles in terms of commonalities around the four central themes, so my discussion of each playstyle will refer back to these themes. Playstyles assume a particular set of rules of play, and part of my analysis tries to understand what these rules are, whether they are codified or informal, and where they come from. Beyond this it is also interesting to look at students' response to these rules, regardless of their origin; this is often the factor that drives participation in a particular direction, and there can be unintended consequences of what might seem to be innocuous rules.

Different interpretations of the rules can stem from the extent to which participants are central or peripheral to the magic circle in which they are participating, and the extent to which this circle overlaps with others. It is important to understand how individuals see their participation in contrast to others, and how they respond to others' participation. Much of this can also come down to their own interpretation of their goals within the magic circle. Rules are inevitably tied to these and a change in goal can mean a shift in attitude towards the rules.

Finally the 'magic' comes across in the way each playstyle relies upon unpredictable and surprising factors even in non-playful settings. I outlined in Chapter 3 that what makes a magic circle of participation 'magic' is the extent to which it provides a unique context that can be distinguished from others, especially when this uniqueness has elements of inexplicability or randomness. There are occasions in discussing playstyles when they seem paradoxical or illogical. Indeed, this feeds into my wider point about shifting playstyles as learning later.

Using playstyles to consider participation in HE means moving on from thinking solely about play and towards thinking more holistically about all of the experiences that a student has. However, I am reluctant to abandon play entirely in my discussion for two reasons. Firstly, games and play were the context in which I was working, and as much as my interest expanded, I remained focused on a project about this aspect in particular. Many of my discussion questions in interviews looked at the intersection between playful and non-playful participation, so it would be impossible to extract play entirely. Secondly, the philosophical arguments I made in Chapter 3 imply that playful experiences can act as something of a microcosm for experience more generally, and that if I want to capture the problematic situations that constitute education then play might be an important site for this. Examining how students follow the rules of play gives us clues as to what to look for as they follow the rules of more general participation, although there may not be a correlation between these two playstyles.

Playstyles emerge from a combination of the individual student, the others they participate with, and the context which provides the 'rules of the game'. In this way, playstyles cannot be seen as an essential attribute of the individual but rather a set of behaviours that might change. I am aware, going into this discussion, of the way in which ideas like learning styles (Kolb, 1984) have been mutated through their use as learning tools which hygienically categorise students as a particular style of learner, and I am keen not to fall into this trap. I am influenced here by Entwistle (1988), whose categorisation of 'deep', 'surface' and 'strategic' approaches to learning depends upon the response of learners to particular activities involving specific educators in a wider context, rather than seeing these solely as characteristics of individual students. This dynamic model allows us to examine individual students, or the wider context, to understand learning. Inspired by this, I disentangle and categorise playstyles here for the purposes of discussion and analysis, knowing that the next step will be tying them back together.

### 6.3 'Playing to win'

...university is a serious place to get your studies done (Arthur, Interview, 25<sup>th</sup> January 2018)

I want my degree! I'm not paying six grand to sit at home! (Sadie, Interview, 17<sup>th</sup> April 2018)

At its heart, this playstyle incorporates what might be considered an instrumentalist approach to HE as best demonstrated by the neoliberal discourse I encountered in the literature review. When they participate in this way, students are interested predominantly in the outcomes of their experiences and how these relate to what they have contributed (in terms of time, effort and money). They behave like the rational consumers that policy and institutions treat them as. As Sadie's quote above suggests, students have a sense of value for money that seems to drive their participation.

Under this playstyle, students learn the rules of the game so that they can find the most efficient path to the most successful outcome (a 'win'). Students conceive of these rules primarily in terms of the content of the course, especially given that the foundation year is framed as a preparation for a full degree programme. Ellie reflected on the idea that she appreciated the foundation year because she 'need[ed] to know everything, like, referencing, how to write'. This idea of 'knowing everything' reflects the idea that there is an 'everything' to be known, and that learning is simply a process of getting through it. I recognised this in student behaviours. Early in the year many students obsessively wrote everything down, even when I suggested that this was not necessary. Intuitively, this seemed to be inherited from students' previous experiences of school.

Indeed, this introduces another conception of the (informal) rules of what it is to be a student, which reflects the idea that these students were participating at the edge of a magic circle. Behaviours like writing everything down or trying to identify the 'correct'



answer are, effectively, ways for students to feel safer about their peripheral participation. They are actions that others who are closer to the centre of the circle perform. Reflecting on other more experienced students, my students framed their participation in terms of their responsibilities. One in particular, exemplified these expectations:

There's a pecking order in terms of... like the outcome of your degree, like a first or a 2:1, like, people are trying to climb the ladder as fast as they can, and, like, throwing down anyone that comes in the way, really. I think that... I've met third years that live in my accommodation, and... they look ill! They look so... and they've always got people over or in they're in the library. It looks scary, like, a third-year student looks scary. (Lara, Interview, 8<sup>th</sup> March 2018)

This 'scariness' implies that a 'win' at the game of HE is important enough that students feel they need to throw people down the ladder or make themselves ill (or at least 'perform' throwing and illness). Students had a clear expectation of what they, as students, were supposed to be doing in order to achieve this. In true neoliberal style, the game is zero-sum, which means that others in the circle do not just offer examples of what is expected, but also act as competition. Students only seemed to be half-joking when they compared the results of formal assessments to each other, especially when those results involved cooperation with others. As I will discuss below, opportunities to collaborate were often framed as threats to individual performance because the stakes were so high.

This playstyle also incorporates a reluctance to acknowledge the other circles in which students might be participating. University work was strictly demarcated from 'the real world' in discussion. University is a 'serious place to get your studies done'. Indeed, I noticed that, although technology means that university work could be completed anywhere, many students opted to complete their work in the building where their lectures took place in order to avoid distraction from outside. One student, talking about her parents after the Easter break, said:

I always get asked “How many words left do you have?”. Every single day! That’s why I always go to the library. I’m like “I’m going to the library now!”. I’ve literally spent my whole three weeks going to the library, I didn’t get to enjoy it. (Zelda, Interview, 17<sup>th</sup> April 2018)

This illustrates two things. Firstly, university is a space away from home where work (in the form of words produced) happens. The break, given that participation in university was interrupted, seemed to get in the way of this, in the same way that a break in a game can interrupt players’ flow. Secondly, this student’s parents contribute to the sense of competition by framing her participation in the same neoliberal terms as others. Zelda was painfully aware that she was the last to attend university after everyone else in her family (even her twin brother), so her goal seemed pre-defined for her. Sadie complained that her parents even extended the sense of competition to within the family, describing her relationship with her sister, who was studying a completely different subject at a different university, as ‘very competitive’. Expectations and rules from one context can affect participation in another, even if they are supposed to be separate, because students’ interpretation of the rules *as rules* can depend upon the way that others talk about them. This even extends into students’ conceptions of what makes them a student in the first place. One student, when asked to write reflectively about what it feels like to be a student, wrote:

The fact that I have my parents try their best to support me and let me know that I have to get work done makes me feel like a student. (Anonymous, Reflective Writing, 25<sup>th</sup> April 2018)

This student’s self-identity as a student is defined by how their parents respond to this identity, and they do so in a way that is framed as ‘supportive’ even though it is ultimately about the work that needs doing in this context.

It could be argued that, because of this focus on success criteria, there is a lack of magic in 'playing to win'. Taking such a technical, instrumentalist approach to one's own education implies that any inefficiency or fun is an unnecessary distraction. Indeed, some of my students' initial response to playful tasks would suggest that they saw things this way. However, I saw evidence of magic in that many students recognised the internal inconsistencies in 'playing to win', and no student participated entirely in this way. For example, the structure of the unit I was teaching, with an emphasis on career- and study-skills, lent itself to this playstyle, and many students identified (in and out of interviews) that they were driven by a desire to get to a 'win' condition.

As the year went on, though, the very existence of other playstyles suggests that students began to see that there were other ways to participate. This was reinforced by students' growing critical understanding of education as a system. They began to see their own careers as part of the same system that currently demanded 'playing to win', and saw opportunities to play differently now that they might not get later. One conversation, which started with Arthur and Elizabeth discussing the ways in which children are seen to be less playful as they get older, shifted to being about the restrictions placed on educators:

It's just the way the system's built and with the more standardised tests and SATs you get, they don't have that freedom. Teachers have to teach the children, they don't have the opportunity to give them that free space to explore and research and do things. They have to keep them in the classroom so they're prepared to pass the test, and do that, because so much of it is about data and making sure results look the right way. (Elizabeth, Interview, 23<sup>rd</sup> October 2017)

Here, for Elizabeth, there is an implied connection between children's ability to play and educators' ability to encourage play, both of which are held back by 'the system' that only seems interested in the appearance of good results. There is also an implication that things might be different, or at least a rejection of the idea that this approach to education is a

good thing. Elizabeth seems to be suggesting that she does not want to be this kind of educator.

Perhaps ‘playing to win’ exists more in rhetoric than in practice. In this way, magic comes from confronting what is usually treated as obvious. The other playstyles I will outline seem to challenge neoliberal conceptions of education by enabling students to participate in different ways.

#### **6.4 ‘Playing for fun’**

‘Are we going to...?’ ‘I don’t know why he wants us to do this but okay, off we go!’  
(Sadie, Interview, 17<sup>th</sup> April 2018)

I’m just... like, I’m here so I’ll participate, like. I’m open to it. I can’t see a reason why people wouldn’t get involved with it, it doesn’t make sense to me. (Nate, Interview, 7<sup>th</sup> February 2018)

This playstyle emerges from the process of learning as students begin to question the nature of ‘success’ in education, and the ways in which their learning is affected by their participation in other contexts. Where ‘playing to win’ has an idealised ‘win condition’ as its end goal, and the rules that lead to this, ‘playing for fun’ involves defining success criteria for oneself to some extent. I choose the word ‘fun’ here to reflect that this is subjective. Students will have to find their own idea of fun through participation. My use of ‘fun’ is also a shorthand for many subjective experiences. Some students may not have fun, nor would they want to, but they do find a subjective motivation for participation that is more personally negotiated than the straightforward effort/grades interaction under ‘playing to win’.

As the comments that open this section suggest, this playstyle comes with a willingness to roll up one’s sleeves and get involved. Especially in the earliest discussions, students repeatedly returned to the idea that they needed to ‘play along’ with university,

not because the rules are immutable but because they have a genuine desire to explore new ideas and activities. Rule-following here is an opportunity for new experiences rather than something done with only the end-goal in mind. 'Playing for fun' still has an instrumentalist vein, though. In the same way that many academic approaches to games- and play-based learning aim to achieve the same goals via more entertaining means, students frame 'having fun' as a necessary part of their development. Lara summed this up, describing being open to new experiences at university as 'beneficial... in terms of growth as a person and confidence'. This attitude moves towards a different instrumentalist discourse of education that is concerned with personal skills growth rather than raw results, and which is recognisable in many of the games-based learning studies from the literature review. It also connects to the nature of the assessment for particular parts of the course, which were framed in terms of personal development. Continuing her thought from the start of this section, Sadie said:

So we all went off and did it [i.e. playful activities] and now it makes sense because now you can tell the people that haven't put an effort into this year are now struggling because [FoAP] and EdLab involves a lot of work throughout the year. You can't all of a sudden go, "I've got my assignment due on Sunday". You can't do that. You have to have actually done stuff throughout the year. (Sadie, Interview, 17<sup>th</sup> April 2018)

'Doing stuff' is important because it is fun, but also because it contributes to personal development, but in Sadie's case the task was not done with a specific end-goal in mind. The end-goal is connected to the activity in retrospect rather than in advance.

Along with the assessment, it is apparent that 'playing for fun' ties into the content of the course that students were studying. We discussed play in nursery education and some students engaged in play in sessions to the extent that they wanted to get into the

heads of the children they would be working with (especially when I pre-emptively used this as a way of 'sell' activities to more sceptical students):

I've never taken an interest in anything... to do with games. But the playful relates to early years, working with children... (Ellie, Interview, 7<sup>th</sup> February 2018)

...I'm going into the role of an educator, the government are quite straight as to "This is what we've got to do as teachers", "These are the rules", "This is the curriculum", whereas I think [with] a more therapeutic approach you could play a little bit more? (Tifa, Interview, 8<sup>th</sup> March 2018)

What is notable about the second of these quotes is that Tifa contrasted the playful, therapeutic approach to what teachers have 'got to do' according to policy. There was a sense that, in order to become an educator, she had to engage with these rules on her own terms, and to challenge them when necessary. Similarly, Arthur, who had spent a year on placement in the American school system, stated that working with others made him realise that 'I'm so much more than just my position, I'm much more than just trying to get these kids to pass the third grade'. There may be many centres to this magic circle beyond the one identified by policy, and students began to appreciate this as they participated more.

Like Arthur, Tifa had already worked in education. It was clear that some of her ideas had come from her position as a primary teaching assistant, especially through discussions with experienced practitioners. This highlights the role of others inside and outside the magic circle in 'playing for fun'; students are more able to access experiences from these others in order to inform their own practice. As the rules of the game feel less restrictive in terms of expected behaviours, students are more able to draw upon their own prior experiences from other contexts and other people.

As much as it overlaps with other magic circles, 'playing for fun' still means treating university as separate to a large extent, although again this is different from the separation

seen in 'playing to win'. Where that separation was defined in terms of the specific function that only university is supposed to fulfil, whilst 'playing for fun' university is a separate space because of its magic, and the unique opportunities for experience that it offers. Again, comments like the ones that opened this section are examples of this, but reflections from students at the end of the year also illustrate this. Lara, who embraced every opportunity going and was well-known for signing up for all of the activities available at the Student Union, connected this to her own developing sense of education theory, writing passionately about how 'experiencing it' (as opposed to 'just writing') was central to the way she had learned over the course of the year. The experiences that university offered (and the way in which it offered them) marked it out as a separate space. For some students, in particular the mature students (some with children) who were returning to education after time in work, the separation of university was part of its appeal. They saw it as an escape ('I see it as a break from the kids! That's why I find it fun!' – Pauline) or as an alternative to the way in which they were used to working:

At work there wasn't any real drive for chaos or anything like that, it was incredibly rigorous. This has allowed me to key into that for a bit. (Nate, Interview, 22<sup>nd</sup> March 2018)

Indeed this sense of belonging to a community is perhaps what marks 'playing for fun' out from the other playstyles. Students would frequently refer to themselves collectively, even beyond the context of group work:

We feel like a little unit, don't we? But then going through the same experiences so we're all going through the presentations and we're all going through the assignments. (Tifa, Interview, 25<sup>th</sup> January 2018)

In contrast with 'playing to win', there is no mention of competition when students talk about each other when 'playing for fun'. There is a sense that students are all working

through the same experiences, and that, even if they have different end-goals they can acknowledge how others approach problems. Other people's experiences are another resource upon which to draw. A sense of community provides some of the magic in 'playing for fun' because the magic circle encompasses a specific group of people who contribute to each other's participation. Students frequently used the analogy of the idealised primary school classroom, and whilst this does link to their professional concerns, it also suggests that they were beginning to see their cohort in a similar light. Participation in this playstyle meant cooperation, exploration and free play. Again, it is possible to frame this in terms of outcomes and goals ('teamwork' being an often-referenced employability skill in students' portfolios).

At this point I must pre-empt the next chapter and acknowledge how my own role (and the role of educators more generally) impinges upon this playstyle. As with 'playing to win', educators occupy a privileged position with the magic circle of university because they ostensibly enforce the rules of the game (or at least the codified, formal ones). They also provide the most obvious example of central participation for students to follow. In this playstyle in particular, though, I had an additional role in that I essentially acted as 'playmaker' for students. If 'playing for fun' is saying yes to opportunities to play, there has to be something to say 'yes' to, and students played (and participated more generally) because I had provided the prompt for this:

You make it playful, you make us do games! (Tifa, Interview, 8<sup>th</sup> March 2018)

There is not a sense here that students feel 'forced' into play (though there are examples of that later). Instead, my role as the instigator of playful experiences is seen as central to the things that students have experienced. As an educator, I am still occupying the 'teacher' model of being the central figure, especially for the interviews as my teaching and research coalesce around play. This is not an isolated case, though. In their reflective writing at the



end of the year, a significant majority of students specifically mentioned how all tutors had provided support and opportunities throughout the year at a personal level. For example:

Experiences of the foundation year have been great as I did not expect so much support and engagement with the teachers. (Anonymous, Reflective Writing, 25<sup>th</sup> April 2018)

I like the relationships you build with lecturers and think that it makes it easier to understand things and ask questions. (Sadie, Reflective Writing, 25<sup>th</sup> April 2018)

This emphasis reflects the dynamic that, even when there is a sense of community rather than a more traditional teaching hierarchy, the same individuals have more influence. When ‘playing for fun’, the freedom to participate on more personally negotiated terms relied upon a group of educators who were willing to hand over some control, whilst remaining in a dominant position.

### **6.5 ‘Playing the game’**

It is what it is. (Nate, Interview, 22<sup>nd</sup> March 2018)

J: Personally speaking I don’t think it’s any fun to actually break the rules. It’s far more enjoyable to bend and contort around the rules to achieve something you want because that’s a more challenging process to get to it instead of flat out breaking it and ignoring instruction. But it’s difficult to design rules to be bendable.

T: To see what you can get away with, like, cheekily, do you mean?

J: Yeah!

(Joel and Tifa, Interview, 8<sup>th</sup> March 2018)

This playstyle, at first glance, shares many aspects with the previous two. ‘Playing the game’ involves taking part in activities, engaging in discussion and participating in education in the way that is expected of the ‘average’ student, if not the ‘ideal’ one. As the name suggests, though, ‘playing the game’ also involves students developing an increased awareness that they are essentially playing a game as they participate at university, as

opposed to playing freely as young children might. This subtle shift in attitude has a knock-on effect in that it moves them towards a more critical relationship to the rules and their own participation.

Students following this playstyle develop the sense that negotiation of participation might involve pushing at the edges of what the rules of participation are, to the extent that these rules start to bend. Students' negotiation is more overt and more empowered than in other playstyles; one of my earliest indications of this was being asked 'Are we going to do activities like this again next week?' and effectively seeing the mental calculations take place as that student decided whether to participate in the future. It was also evident in students asking clarifying questions about the rules; how much word counts mattered in assignments, whether they *needed* to complete playful tasks. As the year went on (and word counts went up within the traditional 10% margin of error), these sorts of negotiations became more obvious and I got the sense that students were more comfortable negotiating their own participation and openly experimenting with how far they would bend.

Even when students did follow the rules, this seemed more self-consciously performative than in other circumstances:

I think you've obviously got to stick to the rules. You can't just go "Well, I'm going to submit my assignment two weeks late". But you can kind of... you can do it in your own way, because that's what uni's about. You get people who are kind of... they'll decide "No I don't want to do that" so they don't do it, whereas in school it was like "You've got to be in five days a week, you've got to..." whereas now, it's kind of... I can kind of work it in my own way. (Sadie, Interview, 17<sup>th</sup> April 2018)

The 'obviously' at the start of this statement is doing a lot of work. It demonstrates that Sadie knows the rules, but it also implies a relationship to those rules (i.e. that they are so obvious that they are not worth mentioning). Her third sentence, starting with a 'but' to

indicate that something *like* rule-breaking might be happening, is equally performative. Doing things 'in your own way' is described as being what university is 'all about'. Sadie is framing her negotiation with the rules of the game as an expected part of being a student, and explicitly contrasts this with school where there was a list of non-negotiable rules to be followed. The question of whether rule-bending is allowed at university is already answered. Instead it is a question of which rules can be bent.

At the same time, there is an extent to which submission to the rules is seen as liberating, in a sense. In the hectic environment of the foundation year, which was full of new experiences for students, the rules offered a sense of order and safety. The phrase 'it is what it is', quoted above, because something of a catchphrase for Nate as he embarked upon his studies, usually uttered in circumstances when I asked him about his own attitude towards the rules. Nate had a clear critical understanding of the rules of the game and how he would change them. In one conversation, he compared university to a 'sandbox' game in which the player is not restricted by rules but can find their own path. However, I also got a sense of relief in his subjecting himself to the rules or admitting his lack of control over the situation. 'It is what it is' became his way of explaining the way in which he went with the flow of the course, even knowing that he could do things differently. This has echoes of Caillois' (1961) *'ilinx'* through which players submit themselves to play and enjoy the abdication of control. Of course, it might be that this sense actually stemmed from his literacy with videogames. Having identified sandbox games as his favourite genre, he was better able to transfer a way of thinking about participation from one context to another, although even the ability to do so reflects the notion that Nate is treating education as a game.

Whilst pushing at the boundaries of the rules, 'playing the game' also involves pushing the boundaries of the magic circle of participation itself. Under this playstyle, it was common to see students like Nate drawing upon their lives beyond university in their

own work, or making connections between what was happening at university and what was happening at home. They were also creative and appropriative in their use of university space. Interviews had revealed how frustrating students found the open-plan spaces in the Education building. As they became more familiar with the space, it was not uncommon to see students co-opt empty (and not 'officially' booked) meeting rooms so that they could work (or even play) together on the days that they were on campus. Walking past closed doors, I would see them playing YouTube videos, rearranging the furniture and charging their phones in spaces that were intended for something else, whilst avoiding the open-plan public meeting spaces designed for this function. In appropriating university spaces, students remade the space to be more comfortable and private, often in the image of more familiar spaces.

The name 'playing the game' suggests a certain element of detachment from (or even disdain for) university, especially given the idea that students might have wanted to remain peripheral. In other playstyles, moving towards more central participation means developing a new identity (i.e. that of the 'perfect student' or the 'aspiring educator'), and necessarily changing because of this by moving away from other magic circles. When 'playing the game' the trajectory of participation is not only towards the centre of the magic circle but might involve moving away from the centre in order to reclaim aspects of existing identities. Students hedge their bets, make the university more like the 'outside world', and follow rules to the extent that they help them, behaving 'cheekily' as Tifa suggests above. The goal may not be central participation; peripheral participation is, in itself, enough for this playstyle.

Taken together, this approach to the rules and the magic circle leads to a more irregular, less predictable form of participation, which might be described using the extended metaphor as more magical. My discussions with students around these ideas sometimes reverted back to the idea of 'chaos'. They saw a value in being chaotic, and also

acknowledged that the foundation year was an opportunity to be chaotic that perhaps would not be available to them as they approached the end of their degree programmes and had to take assessment more seriously. In this sense, 'playing the game' is (as in Huizinga's magic circle) a temporarily bounded activity; I got the sense that students would do it for as long as they could before context demanded that they return to more 'serious' ways of participating. Sadie exemplified this in her attitude towards playful tasks near the start of the year, when I asked her why she thought adults did not play as much as children:

If you have got stuff to do and you're playing, like, you're constantly thinking "I should just do this now", you have to stop yourself. Whereas if you're a kid you can just have fun, and they have fun until their mum tells them to go to bed.  
(Sadie, Interview, 23<sup>rd</sup> November 2017)

We can read the 'stuff to do' as the coursework, the assignments, the things students need to complete to 'win'. Play is a distraction, but one that is potentially compulsive enough that Sadie will keep doing it even when 'constantly thinking' of what she 'should' be doing. In thinking in this way, there is a tacit acknowledgement of some sort of lusory attitude, that does not affect the outcome of participation, but that keeps her playing as long as she wants to do so. At the same time though, other playstyles creep in to ideas like this; the guilt over playing when there are serious things to be done is suggestive of 'playing to win'. In this way, Sadie seem to be using multiple playstyles at once, even though they have the potential to contradict each other.

Joel compared university to school, saying that at school pupils 'were always confined by the lines that the school wanted us to colour in'. 'Playing the game' means experimenting with colouring outside those lines, even if this might mean not obeying the rules of the game as they have been inherited from those in authority. Importantly, this experimentation is part of a process of negotiation; the aim is not to break the rules but to

change them to incorporate newcomers' experiences. Within this context, participation is critical engagement with the rules of the game and a potential means for students to empower themselves through chaos. Chaotic players are only chaotic within the confines of the game, though. Just as all players of a board game roll dice and use the playing pieces, even for chaotic ends, when 'playing the game' students work within the confines of the rules even as they try to change them. Colouring outside the lines is still colouring.

## **6.6 'Counterplay'**

So you should define the rules as simple guidelines, as mere suggestions to encourage people to play with it. If it's a set rule then people might want to go against it because they're rebels. (Joel, Interview, 8<sup>th</sup> March 2018)

My friend did [cheat] once. You know, like, in speaking and listening for languages, you get a cheat sheet, with, like, thirty words on it, on the paper. So what she did was, she put an extra, like, six words on but then she crossed them out. But crossed them out enough that she could see the words, so she had extra words, but she got away with it. Then she felt bad! But there you go. But, I dunno, does being in education kind of make you want to break the rules because you're so confined? I don't know... (Lara, Interview, 8<sup>th</sup> March 2018)

There were rare occasions when students took 'playing the game' further, critically distancing themselves from the rules to the extent that they began to break them. Like Bartle's (1996) 'killer' playstyle, this playstyle seems to rely upon subverting and upsetting the rules of the game, which has an effect on other players. However, counterplay is distinguishable from other 'negative' forms of participation because it has the potential to be a more positive form of participation defined by a strong sense of agency and autonomy on the part of the student, and because it has the power to disrupt and transform learning environments through critique.

This playstyle was rare, and tended to emerge in discussions rather than in observed practice. More often than not students would talk of the potential to break the rules rather than actually breaking them. They also spoke of hypothetical 'rebels' and the impact that they might have on their own studies, reflecting the idea that all students may be affected by others' playing subversively (especially with regard to cheating). From a pragmatist perspective, of course, these conversations themselves created meaning, and because of this it is worth treating counterplay as a 'real' playstyle even for the impact that its mere possibility might have on other playstyles.

The counterplayer's mischievous relationships with the rules requires a deep and critical understanding of those rules. They do not just ignore the rules but rather use them (and other's people response to them) as a tool for play. In this way, counterplay is a reaction to other playstyles and depends upon others using them. In the same way that cheating only works if everyone else is following the rules, counterplay needs to encounter less subversive playstyles in order to be fun. The counterplayer acknowledges that other participants in the magic circle are an important part of their participation, but rather than potential competitors or collaborators they are essentially another part of the game, and can be manipulated and appropriated just as much as rules and tools are.

Part of counterplay is the ability to develop appropriation of the game for one's own ends, and in this way it builds upon the overlap in circles seen in 'playing the game'. I saw counterplay in students' ability to play magic circles off each other and bring others into this process. For example, in an EdLab session in which I introduced a complex tabletop game for students to play and create new rules for, one student used her previous experiences of the game at home as an excuse to skip the first section of the session, arguing that she did not need to participate with the rest of her group. Her way of framing this was active and positive, though. She responded enthusiastically to the idea of task and used it as excuse to engage me in discussion of the game. I got the sense that I was being

mischievously 'played' as part of her way of negotiating her own participation in the session. This also depended on the rest of the group, who were engaged in the game, which ensured that I was not so distracted explaining the game that I could not talk with her. In order to disrupt and appropriate the context in which they are participating, students need to understand their expected function within that context. It became clear to me that this student had a clear understanding of what was expected, and her participation went well beyond merely ignoring instruction. Instead, she made the process in which all students were engaging a part of her counterplay. Where some students might have seen a straightforward learning activity (which might involve tacit negotiation of meaning), she saw a situation to be negotiated more explicitly.

It was also interesting to see the extent to which this playstyle looped back and overlapped with 'playing to win'. The context of competition, under critical scrutiny from students, began to look like more of a rigged game, and given this they started to question their own participation. In a discussion on students at other universities paying to use essay banks in order to 'win' at education one student said:

I always cheat in Monopoly. Always. But I feel that's not because I'm being lazy, it's because I'm falling behind. So I don't want to lose. (Naomi, Interview, 8<sup>th</sup> March 2018)

Of course, this was with reference to an actual game, and there is no suggestion that Naomi really used the same tactics in her studies. However, there is a sense that students like Naomi are using counterplay as a way to actively and critically engage with the rules, even hypothetically. They see a system that does not work for them, or that has rules that vary for different players, and participate in order to understand and challenge it. As a personal tutor, I had many discussions with students about the university's idiosyncratic attendance monitoring system, which sent out threatening automated emails to students who had missed sessions having been in the previous week. This seemed to be more punitive for



students who usually attended and missed one session than it was for those who rarely attended in the first place. The students' response to this was not to comply with the rules and change their behaviour (in many ways they did not need to do this anyway) but rather to understand this particular rule as one that was not worth worrying about breaking in their specific context. They acknowledged the power of having a 'clean record' under a system that is obsessed with numbers, but saw their own priorities differently. This was perhaps the only concrete and widespread example of counterplay that I witnessed, but it indicates a developing attitude towards the rules of the game that goes beyond 'playing the game' and towards a desire to actively challenge it.

### **6.7 'Not playing'**

When approaching the concept of non-participation, it is worth reconsidering what is possible given my methodology. I have foregrounded students' experiences in this study, and it can be difficult to access the experiences of 'non-participants' precisely because they are not involved in the research process in the same way that others are. Whilst I observed what might be seen as typical 'non-participation' in lectures (folded arms, mobile phone use, silence, lack of engagement with specific learning tasks etc.), these students did not tend to volunteer for interviews, or even offer much in the way of live feedback as to their experiences. Ethically, it becomes difficult to justify trying to explain their participation, as doing so invariably ends up putting words in their mouths. The best we can hope for is to triangulate a partial understanding via observations of teaching sessions and from the testimony of other students. Indeed, this form of triangulation seems apt because of the way in which my model of participation ties an individuals' participation to that of others. Becoming a part of a community of practice necessarily affects how others participate in that community too.

Given this, it should be clear from discussion of other playstyles that not participating at all is far more difficult than we might have assumed initially. When it involves deliberate action on behalf of the student, what might otherwise be thought of as non-participation seems to come under 'counterplay' or some other subversive playstyle; Remmele and Whitton (2013) draw upon Suits (1978) in their discussion of negative behaviours in educational games, identifying 'spoilsports' who attempt to change the game by refusing to play it, thus shifting the boundaries of the magic circle. Beyond this, if an individual's very presence in the room implies a particular relationship to the rules of the game, so does their absence, and this presence or absence will affect the participation of others in the learning process.

This came across in direct and indirect ways. In interviews, students frequently expressed frustration with those who did not participate in group tasks in the expected way, which was reflected in observations of their planning sessions (especially for the very first assessed assignment of the year, which was a group presentation). Many of these frustrations came from those who were 'free-riding' on others work. One repeated example concerned an informal student-curated Snapchat group which others who these students had never even met had suddenly joined to ask for help on assignments. Beyond this, though, students were also frustrated by others' non-participation simply because they could not understand this behaviour, which was incompatible with their own approaches:

S: If you ask anyone I've worked with in a group, I cannot stand not being organised, it stressed me out so much. We do group work, and everybody will be like 'Oh yeah, we'll just kind of do it as we go along...' – no! 'When are we meeting? What are we doing? Can we sort ourselves out?!'

Z: She stresses out for other people as well!

S: Oh, I do! Like, nobody was in today, I'm thinking 'How are you coping?'. But I don't understand how you're getting the work done!  
(Sadie and Zelda, Interview, 17<sup>th</sup> April 2018)

In a less direct way, non-participation and absence affected the participation of others through the way in which it affected the sense of 'magic' in the room. In the best attended sessions, students were quick to grasp activities and even the least playful students were more engaged in playful tasks (even if this was in a subversive way). In contrast, my observation notes from the middle of the year, when attendance at Thursday morning sessions slumped to its lowest levels, refer to a sense that the students seemed to be going through the motions and were less motivated because there were fewer people in the room. Group tasks needed to be reconfigured on the fly in order to react to absences, and playful activities in particular sometimes lacked the critical mass that would draw participants together. These absences had an impact on what went on in sessions through forcing the students that did turn up to consider their own relationship to the rules, and changing the composition of the magic circle itself, reiterating the idea that playstyles are not dependent solely on the individual students' choices. This worked both ways. Pauline, who had a run of both ill health and family issues at the start of the year, later reflected that her difficulties in catching up upon returning were down to community. She said it was difficult to engage with others because of their existing 'cliques', but also that this was solved by getting involved in the community.

This case also demonstrates that it is necessary to consider the other magic circles that are involved. Students were clearly doing something else if they were not present in the classroom. Confronting what this 'something else' is forces us to think about the legitimacy of absence and how even this is negotiated. Pauline's illness or childcare needs were 'legitimate' reasons for non-attendance, or at least legitimate enough to be managed by attendance systems. This felt very different to just not turning up. At an institutional

level, in practice if not in policy, other magic circles are acknowledged to be important, often because an existing role (i.e. family member) takes precedent over new ones. Pauline used these experiences and pulled them into her own reflective work on the year, making her absence legitimate not just institutionally but educationally. This was absence from the classroom as *part* of learning, but it could only take place because a return to the classroom highlighted the learning opportunities in the absence.

So far, this theme of non-participation has been framed as a lack of attendance. However, there were some times when classic ‘non participation’ in university came across, especially in the context of play. Students who would otherwise participate in other activities reacted different to playful tasks, possibly for some of the negative reasons outlined above. This is difficult to ascertain, however, as the most active participants in my research were also the most active participants in play, which meant that I was only offered occasional glimpses into the experiences of the ‘non-players’. Nothing illustrates this point like a blank box. After a year of trying new strategies to hear from students who would not otherwise participate, I was surprised when a student who I would have classed as a ‘non-player’ volunteered to take part in an end-of-year reflective writing session. She gave thoughtful and reflective responses to questions on how she had developed over the year, considering that she has more ‘authority’ over her participation in learning. And then, as if to illustrate, this, she left the following box blank:

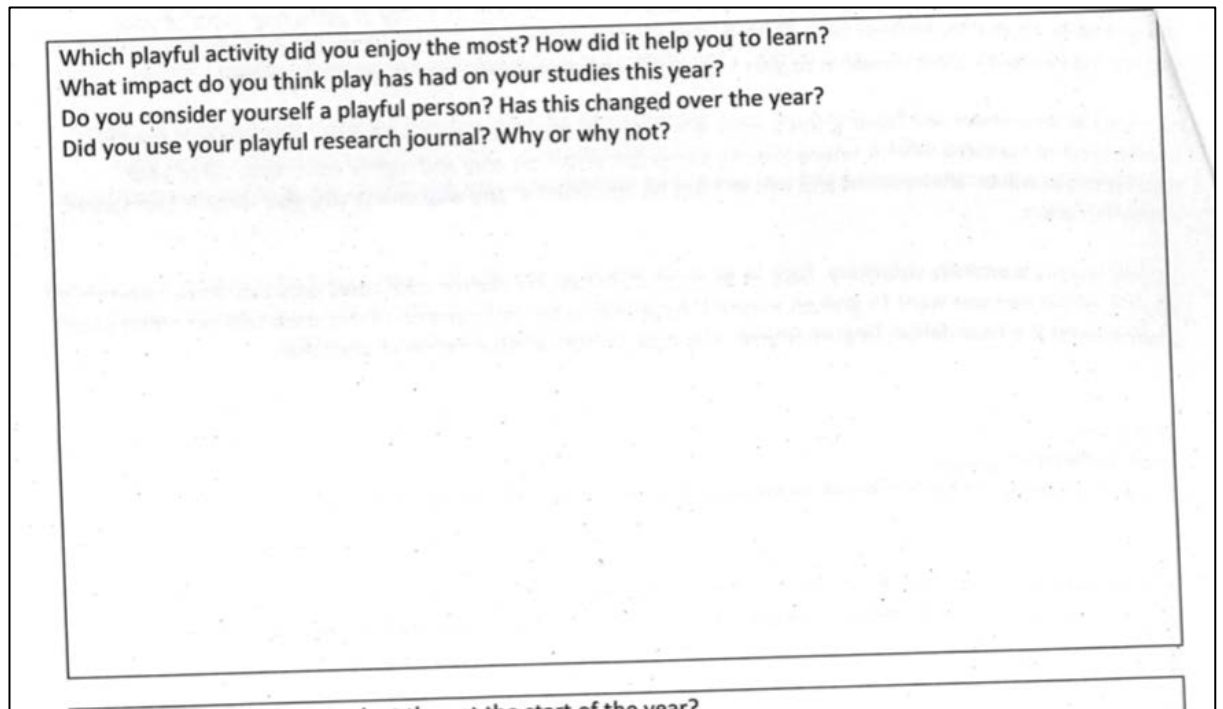


Figure 6A: The blank box

It is difficult not to read meaning into this. The student had spent the year participating entirely on her own terms, and only providing the occasional window into her thinking. This was particularly the case in more playful tasks, when she would often sit back and let others play while she observed. She handed assignments in on time, attended fairly regularly, made notes and did all of the things that students are supposed to do according to the 'rules of the game', but this was the limit of her observable participation. The fact that she chose not to answer the question on play sums up her approach to play over the course of the year. Her authority over her own participation meant that she participated exactly where she wanted to and no further. When it came to play, it seemed her non-participation was more overt than it was with other activities. If play provides an opportunity to participate in a different way, to critically engage with the rules and 'say yes' to different experiences, it also seems to extend to the act of 'saying no' to play as well.

## 6.8 Changing playstyles

You can't start a degree how you're going to end, otherwise what's the point in...

You may as well just go to the last year. (Tifa, Interview, 25<sup>th</sup> January 2018)

Throughout the discussion, I have hinted at the idea that students might shift between playstyles, or hold contradictory playstyles at the same time. Education is about personal development, so it stands to reason that, as Tifa suggests above, students might change as they participate in their studies, and as a result of this participation. This can be a result of an active choice on the part of the student, but also might be in response to others' playstyles, or a change in the rules of the game.

As the foundation year was a transitional one for many students, I saw evidence of shifting in the way in which students reflected on past educational experiences:

N: I was terrible in school, I was the worst, terrible. But then I worked, and I realised that I was stuck in a job that I didn't want to be in, and I figured I just needed to... I always had the ability there at school but I never really applied myself, sort of thing, I was disengaged. So yeah, coming back I think I prefer the foundation year as well, same sort of reasons as [Ellie]. It's easier as a way in, especially not coming directly from education.

E: Because I've come straight from sixth form. In school I was really good, a proper goodie two-shoes, and then sixth form I kind of went downhill from there. But then coming to uni and into foundation, to kind of build back up again.

Me: So I guess it's kind of... You've both had kind of wobbly lines, it hasn't been a straight upward trajectory. You've kind of gone off at tangents, that sort of thing. Can you see a clear trajectory now, off the back of the foundation degree?

E: Yeah.

N: Yeah.

(Nate and Ellie, Interview, 7<sup>th</sup> February 2018)

Here, Ellie and Nate tell similar stories from different angles, which highlights what foundation year students have in common despite their diverse backgrounds. Both of them think about change over time and between contexts. The shift from Ellie's 'goodie two-

shoes' to Nate's 'terrible' and vice-versa, from school to sixth-form to work to university. In both cases, there is a sense that a new context renewed or transformed their relationship to the rules, and that this relationship depended somewhat on a retrospective view of previous contexts. Nate, for example, only understood how his previous participation could have been different when it was seen in light of both employment and the foundation year. For both of them, the foundation year offers an opportunity to shift playstyles again. I will return to the idea that the foundation year was a particularly good environment for this in Chapter 8.

I also saw shifting playstyles within the year, and again these seemed to be (partially) down to the specific foundation year cohort. Early on, Sadie spoke of her disappointment with her A-level results, feeling 'gutted' that she even had to 'delay' by taking a foundation year rather than start on a full degree programme. Reflecting at the end of the year, though she said that it had been the best year of education she had completed so far, and saw this in terms of how she had approached the topic. At first, she was concerned only with the idea of being seen as a failure in instrumental terms (her disappointing results, not getting through the course quickly enough), but she eventually developed a sense that going more slowly, and experiencing more, might benefit her in different ways. This can be explained in terms of a shift in playstyles in response to changing goals, and this shift itself was part of the learning experience. Had she come out of the year still insisting that she just wanted to get it over with and get back on track, it could be questioned whether she had learned as much.

Lave and Wenger's (1991) theory of legitimate peripheral participation suggests that increased participation in a community of practice is not simply evidence of learning but actually *is* learning. Similarly, I would argue that the shifts in playstyle that I have outlined here manifest learning. When we consider what is required to shift playstyles (an understanding of the rules of the game, a level of self-awareness of one's position in

relation to those rules, the ability to renegotiate this position through participation), it is clear that it involves a huge number of concepts, processes and experiences that would normally constitute learning. The results of this process are less certain. Practice does not necessarily become less peripheral, or more similar to the idealised archetypes that students have when they enter university. For example, the shift from 'playing to win' to 'counterplay' might appear to be a negative one (and probably would be from the point of view of a university data manager), but requires the student to develop such a nuanced understanding of the 'game' of university that it cannot be denied that they have learnt something.

## **6.9 Conclusion: Playstyles and learning**

Arthur's comments at the start of this chapter reveal a lot about the idea of playstyles because they uncover a confusion. Is Arthur playing to win, or playing for fun, or a combination of both? In reality, no student held a consistent playstyle for the duration of the year, and although movement between each playstyle cannot (and should not) be characterised as a natural progression, it happened as students became more familiar with the magic circle in which they were participating.

The idea of playstyles allows us to see what students see; that different students will invariably participate in different ways, and that these differences will affect the participation of others. In addition, there are inconsistencies around rules and goals. Students may see one goal as primary, and will read others' actions in those terms even if that particular goal is not held by others. They draw upon discourse and rhetoric around education in justifying their actions, but interpret these through their own personal experiences.

There may be other playstyles that I have not identified here (in fact Chapter 8 will begin to develop some of these ideas into what might be considered another playstyle). I



have summarised some of the key ideas in Figure 6B, linking playstyles back to the model of the magic circle. I have also included non-participation as defined by the absence of some of these key features. It is possible to not participate because one is ignoring the rules within a particular circle, or because one is not in the circle in the first place. The question marks I include in these sections reflect that this is an area for further work, which may require different methods:

Playstyle	Play as...	Relationship to the Rules	Relationship to Other Participants	The Magic Circle
Playing to Win	Competition	Rules as the 'correct answer'	Other participants are competitors/referees	One centre
Playing for Fun	Cooperation	Rules as guidelines / best practice	Other participants are collaborators/influences	Many centres
Playing the Game	Appropriation	Rules as flexible / negotiable	Other participants are part of negotiation process.	Peripherality / Overlap with other circles
Counterplay	Transgression	Rules as there to be broken	Other participants are part of the game.	Broken / fuzzy borders
Not Playing	Non-participation	No rules?	No other participants?	No circle?

*Figure 6B: Five playstyles*

In answer to the research question that began this chapter, I have argued that play helps us to understand undergraduate participation by providing the magic circle as a powerful tool for analysing forms of participation, and by unlocking the idea of playstyles as a way of describing many of the 'unofficial' ways in which students participate beyond conventional conceptions. This ties into existing literature in a number of ways. From the perspective of games-based learning, this answer acts a response to Selwyn (2010) and Halverson's (2012) demands that social scientists do not treat games as a solution that can be transferred between contexts. Participation in game-based learning, like any form of participation, will depend upon the playstyle that students use, which in turn is profoundly

dependent on context. At the same time playing games in educational settings can provide a context for understanding how the rules might be different, which is a key step in developing a critical understanding of the process of education.

From the perspective of widening participation, playstyles also contribute to a more critical discussion in that they align with the idea of transforming participation from authors like Burke (2012). The implication of there not being one 'correct' playstyle is that it is misguided to expect students to fit an academic ideal that is constructed in the image of academics. Playstyles highlight that students construct their own participation in response to that of others, and also that their participation can draw upon influences far beyond the university which might otherwise be seen as obstacles. The power of what is already happening in the lives of students might be utilised to change what they, and their universities, do. Vitally, examining playstyles allows us to consider the way in which students *actually* participate, and not just the ways in which educators want them to.

Learning is not necessarily about getting 'better' at the game, but rather developing a position towards the game so that one can participate on one's own terms. Games designer Raph Koster (2013) equates playing with learning, arguing that once one has 'grokked' a game (i.e. fully understood and developed expertise of its rules), one stops learning and it stops being fun until new rules are created. What happens when HE stops being 'fun'? A student might excel within the rules of the game, but if they do not have fun, or understand how they could have played differently, have they learnt as much as they could? The issue as it currently stands is that this does not count as 'success'. Later in the thesis, I will return to this thread in order to understand how the game of HE might change in response to this idea by building upon the way in which participants can shift playstyles.

## 7 – Educator/researcher/player: Metaphors

### 7.1 Introduction

In this chapter I address my second research question: ‘How does a playful approach can transform teaching and research in HE?’. In asking this question I turn the playful lens I used to examine students in the previous chapter back on myself and my research. Play is a useful concept here because it enables particular forms of participation, but also provides a frame through which to view participation more generally. In this chapter, participation, as action within a social context, widens out to include my own participation as an educator and researcher, and I consider myself as member of a community of practice including other lecturers and researchers, as well as my students.

In the first half of the chapter, I present my own reflective writing as data that form the basis for an autoethnographic analysis. Rather than telling the story of the whole year, I examine three reflective pieces which provide ‘evocative vignettes’, as advocated by Humphreys (2005) who argues for their value in moving beyond superficial understandings of educational practice. These vignettes demonstrate that the relationship between myself and the community in which I was working shifted over time, and this is key to understanding the ways in which I conceptualise play as often in tension with other activities.

Discussing and analysing this tension requires me to interrogate what participation in teaching and research actually involves. This leads into the second half of the chapter in which I confront my internalised notion of education and research as design, and by examining the ways in which my own teaching, research and play overlapped and interacted with each other I develop alternative metaphors. Building on these, I consider the idea that playful metaphors might transform participation just as much as playful teaching and research methods can. These metaphors are reminiscent of the playstyles in

the previous chapter, but where those were defined in terms of students' relationship to the rules and others in the magic circle, these metaphors focus instead on the ways in which teaching, research and play intersect with each other. Indeed, in a way 'educator', 'researcher' and 'player' are the playstyles at work, and I try to find ways in which they can be used simultaneously.

I return to and build upon the conceptual model of the magic circle of participation throughout. Indeed, the autoethnographic story I tell is really the story of how this model developed as an idea, which means that my actions and thoughts early in the story can feel inconsistent with the ideas I have already outlined. However, honesty about the process of how ideas develop is one of the key threads I will outline as the chapter goes on. Once more it seems that the processes of theorising about play in education, researching play in education and practising play in education are intertwined in a messy, chaotic way that can be difficult to capture in a clean way.

## **7.2 Teaching and research: A shift in participation**

In order to understand and develop my own practice, I wrote a number of reflective pieces over the course of my PhD that built my fieldnotes into more substantial pieces, and I turn to these pieces as data in order to analyse my teaching and research practice. I am focused here on similar themes to those I examined in the data concerning students: play; participation; life beyond university; and my interpretation of 'the rules' all come up. Other themes emerge as well. These three pieces, for example, concern a focus from my teaching on students' soft-skills development to some extent. This is partially why I include them together here. This particular aspect of learning was the site of a complicated negotiation between teaching and research practices as I placed some of the institutional reasoning behind the necessity of teaching skills in this way under the lens of critical research.

Because of this, these extracts are particularly rich in a sense that I am caught between different roles.

Indeed, this is where the conceptual model of the magic circle comes in, though I use it slightly differently here. Rather than discuss playstyles within a specific role, here my roles are defined for me to a large extent, and I conceptualise my practice in terms of how these different roles overlap. As my participation changes, so does my position in relation to the various magic circles of teaching, research and play.

### 7.2.1 Part One: Utopianism

These first extracts come from a piece of design fiction that I wrote at the very start of my PhD when considering an overall structure for the activities I would go on to deliver the following academic year. I imagined the impact that my design would have in order to think more closely about what it would actually involve. At this point of the process, I was operating in a purely theoretical capacity, immersing myself in academic reading for the first time in a decade. The students I would go on to work with had not even applied for the course yet. Indeed, I had not even met the colleagues with whom I would work or even confirmed that I would be working on the foundation year specifically. This piece, then, reflects a pure expression of what I wanted to achieve, free of the constraints of reality. It is something of a utopian vision of my initial design for a game that students would play over the course of the year, using journals and challenge cards to play with the university:

*George looks down at the notebook she has just been handed. It has her name on the cover. Opening it, she sees that each page has a small typewritten note stuck in its centre. Each one offers an instruction, a question or a cryptic clue.*

*She has been asked to try to follow at least two of these instructions before the next catch-up meeting, and to use the space around the instruction to record any results or thoughts from her experiences. It reminds her of when she used to keep a diary as a teenager, and she feels slightly apprehensive about engaging in a reflective activity like this. But then again it's novel to have an object like this to carry around; she does all of her note-taking on her iPad nowadays and there's something nostalgic about having an old exercise book like the ones she used in Year 7.*

*Her phone buzzes. It's a text from Oscar, who she met at her first seminar and who tagged along to the meeting today:*

*'What does yours say? I have to write a haiku about my next lecture.'*

*...*

*By the end of the game, George's notebook is falling apart at the seams. The cover is held on with extra staples. Quite a few of the pages have shopping lists and reminders all over them. A couple have been torn out completely, turned into paper planes and origami sculptures that sit on a shelf in her room.*

*Looking back at the process, it is difficult to tell whether it was the game itself that helped her to develop, or the catch-up meetings with what has become known as her 'community of play'. It was probably both; she recalls meeting up informally around campus with other members of the group and sharing conspiratorial notes with each other as part of that week's challenges, but also using these opportunities as a check-in to see how they were getting along more generally. Knowing that there were others around her from other subject areas, experimenting actively with how to think like an undergraduate meant that she didn't feel she was figuring things out from scratch for the first time.*

*It's also clear that the better she got at solving and setting challenges, the more she was able to link what she was doing back to her 'real' studies and her real life. She feels more comfortable thinking critically, speaking up in seminars and making connections*

*between the different theories that she is studying. She thinks the game even improved her writing, especially around adding her own personal twist to her essays. Beyond this, the game gave her a space to think critically even when she wasn't reading a book or taking part in a seminar. For her, the game became more about being reflective about her own life and looking for opportunities to engage with interesting things without needing any other excuse. (Reflective Writing Extract, October 2016)*

The influences on these early ideas are clear. The value of play's and games' creativity, freedom and fun come from my earliest readings of authors like Suits (1978) and Gee (2007), and at the same time the way in which I tell the story of students gradually progressing towards autonomy is reflective of Freire (1996) and other critical pedagogues. There are also clear design influences from games like the open-ended exploratory activities offered by Keri Smith (2011), along with my own use of notebooks to solve puzzles in *The Witness* (Thekla Inc., 2016).

The clearest influence, though, is my former career in school education. As much as I emphasise play as an open-ended activity, my success criteria for what students get out of the process is framed in terms of how they 'develop', specifically around critical thinking, public speaking, study skills and writing. Part of this is down to the fact that I was writing to meet the specification of a generic course, and was aware that these were the sort of skills that would be targeted. Beyond this, though, I am writing for an (at least implied) audience. In writing about skills I am positioning myself as an idealised educator with a clear idea of what education is supposed to be doing. Similarly, my fictional students are idealised. They engage with tasks, collaborate and communicate, and are capable of self-reflection. This sense of engagement also comes across in the emotive way in which I describe what they did. Whilst acknowledging the affective aspects of the course might

seem novel, there is no sense of discomfort, boredom or disengagement from the playful activity.

What is not in the text is any idea of how my research fits into this, which is possibly explained by the fact that I was less familiar with research processes at the time. It is unclear how I know that any of this has taken place in my fictional future, or how students have been involved in the research process. At the same time, the way in which George drops the phrase 'communities of play' could not have come from anyone other than the researcher (I was reading Lave and Wenger [1991] at the time). In this way, I am at least implying that my research will produce conceptual understandings that will influence teaching to the extent that the vocabulary reaches students. There is overlap between my participation in teaching and research at a conceptual level, but it does not appear to be practical.

However, it is difficult to see an overlap because my teaching role also seems absent. In this fiction, play is so powerful that it becomes a self-sustaining activity that merely needs to be instigated before students themselves take control of the process. The fact that I minimised my own role is further evidence that I did not yet consider myself to be participating (even peripherally) in the process. Of course, my absence is an implied presence; given a blank slate, I invent something that 19-year-old John would have loved and design for myself. At the same time, there must be someone masterminding this whole activity and producing the conditions for students to thrive. By removing myself from the description, though, I am positioning this as a piece of legitimate education research that can be adapted and recreated elsewhere. The activity is not dependent on the educator but the resources.

In terms of the model of the magic circle of participation, the key theme that emerges from this early text is that I wanted the 'magic' of participation without necessarily thinking about the rules that would achieve this. The resources are produced typewritten



and personalised for student and even the destruction of the notebook occurs in a creative, positive way which leaves perfect souvenirs of playful experiences. As I said, this is freedom from the constraints of reality. What we will see in future vignettes is the extent to which the rules of various overlapping magic circles constrain and reshape play. As it stands, I was so peripheral to the magic circle of participation that I was not even sure what the centre might look like.

### 7.2.2 Part Two: Realism

These extracts are taken from a piece written over a year after the first, and after one term of teaching on the Foundations of Academic Practice course. They illustrate the extent to which my ideas on play and participation had begun to shift towards what might be considered realism in the face of the practicalities of the course. I wrote this as I was designing the second term's activities, which were adapted and transformed in light of these reflections and discussions with colleagues. I am also writing in light of *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild* (BotW: Nintendo, 2017), a game that came out whilst I was designing the first term's activities and which I use as a metaphor here.

*I entered into the first term's teaching on the Foundations of Academic Practice [FoAP] course with two goals. On one hand, I had a research project on play and participation to complete, and this would necessarily involve introducing play to my own teaching in order to encourage a sense of playfulness in my students. On the other, I had a university-approved course outline to follow, and I was collaborating in my teaching with another educator who, whilst passionate about similar educational ideas to me, also needed to be able to deliver the course content. At the same time my reading and initial discussions with the previous year's students suggested that I wouldn't just be able to launch straight into*

*play, and that even students would need encouragement to leave their comfort zones and diverge from more traditional pedagogic methods.*

...

*Throughout the design and planning process, I had Breath of the Wild's Plateau in the back of my mind. I was interested in the idea of a self-directed space that gave students an opportunity to practice play in their own way, to identify the ways in which they could play as part of their studies, and to begin to make forays into the world beyond the classroom to make use of the playful attitude they had been practising. In this context, the in-classroom challenges were the dungeons populating the Plateau, and the homework and journals provided the open space through which students could experiment, practise and reflect, all of which reflected the 'open world' of the full degree course (and the world beyond). Through building their sense of playfulness, my hope was that they would start to see opportunities to 'say yes', which would expand opportunity and enable them to participate in new ways.*

...

*This issue came to the fore when I considered the distinction between in-class challenges and homework challenges, as even the more engaged students in class did not necessarily complete the homework challenges. This largely came down to the fact that they were not a requirement for the course (beyond providing opportunities to practice the sort of reflective writing upon which students will eventually be assessed for FoAP). Even students who were fully involved in playful tasks in session found it difficult to transfer this playful attitude into a different context... Indeed this is indicative of many of the frustrations that I found with the approach I took to teaching, which tended to stem from assumptions I had made about students' approaches to playfulness. In the same way that participation can have many varied forms, play can too, and I sensed this in the way in which students interacted with the playful activities I had developed.*

...

*I entered this term determined to be playful in my approach to teaching but often found myself withdrawing back into the traditional role of lecturer to some extent. I had to consider my own position as a new (and junior) member of staff at the university, and as a researcher whose research depended on having a teaching schedule. My own behaviour was often far more compliant (with university regulations and structures; with the prepared and approved outline of the course; with tradition) than I would have liked, but I am starting to wonder if I had any other option. (Reflective Writing Extracts, January 2018)*

Realism is certainly a theme here. I am still thinking in terms of eventual goals, both in research and teaching, and I am preoccupied with the 'rules' that the institution places on me, but beyond this I am starting to develop a much clearer conception of how my idealised conception of play interacts with the reality of HE. I write of 'frustrations', 'assumptions', tradition, and compliance; all concepts which indicate that my early experiences of negotiating my own participation in HE teaching and research were focused on this interaction.

In many ways, these extracts tell the story of putting my initial plan into action, and many of my proposed elements remain. Students have their notebooks, and the 'challenges' I refer to often involve using these as a starting point or as a centre for activity, but I have extended my idea of play to a much wider programme of study involving key playful 'tools' which are framed as research skills. This links to a much wider continuity with my plans, in that I still frame play as something that needs to be justified by goals that are more legitimate. My success criteria are the same; I am interested in how play contributes to students' development as educational practitioners, 'practis[ing] and reflect[ing]', and this has extended to my understanding of my own research. I write about play as if I *have* to because my research requires it. My sense of idealism seems blunted.

The clash between idealism and realism is also behind some of the major differences we can identify between this piece and the previous one. In the move from abstract to specific I identify a new game, *BotW*, as an example of what I am trying to do, and in the process shift from being directly influenced by specific game activities and towards trying to understand how experiences of games might transfer into experiences of education. *BOTW*'s opening section ('The Plateau') acts as a tutorial for the player to learn the rules of the much larger virtual space ('open world') in which the rest of the game takes place, and the fact that I identify this aspect in particular hints that I am beginning to see how participation in one smaller activity might impact participation more generally. At the same time, though, this is based on an idealised notion of play (or of a particular 'playstyle' at least). Even given my disappointment with the way in which students have engaged with existing playful tasks, my 'solution' depends upon a specific form of participation. Whilst I am considering the transgressive aspects of play in relation to university regulations and structures, or the idea that play may not be an entirely positive force in education settings, it is clear that I have not made the leap to understanding that my idea of play itself might be the target of that transgression. In becoming a lecturer, even one who pushes students to leave their 'comfort zones', I have assumed a position of power that is threatened by the act of transgression, which, given my already complicated position as a peripheral participant, complicates my relationship to the play I want to encourage.

By way of illustration of some of these points, I can refer to the session on creativity which I designed and delivered around halfway through the first term. This followed the format of the earliest FoAP sessions, each of which focused on a specific playful 'tool' that students were encouraged to use in their work across the course. In this session we used Lego as a way to explore convergent and divergent thinking as students invented imaginary educational tools. There was a fun, energised atmosphere in the room as students began to work together on their Lego models, which was undercut by some students questioning

why we were using Lego rather than more conventional means. This was something I had anticipated. Indeed, in an effort to win less enthusiastic students over I had framed the entire session in terms of NESTA's *The Future of Skills: Jobs in 2030* report (Bakhshi et al., 2017), which argues that creativity is the key attribute workers will need in a future of increased automation. Whilst providing a reason to play within the session, I found that this undermined the overall sense of playfulness in that it relied upon an instrumental approach to the problem. Later, observing another group undertake the same task in a session led by a colleague, I felt more of a sense of playfulness. This may have been down to the fact that I was not delivering the session, though. Without the perceived responsibility to convince students of the value of the task I was perhaps freer to notice the play that occurred.

Indeed, my finding research 'easier' when I was not teaching is indicative of the idea that I was still struggling to reconcile my participation in the two activities in the same context. Once again I am faced with reality as students do not participate in my research in the ways that I intend or require (either attending interviews sporadically, or, in many cases, not participating at all). The reflective piece extracted above closes with some thoughts on research and teaching, using a metaphor of obstacles and doorways borrowed from *Super Metroid* and the Plateau from *BotW*:

*I also frequently seem to hit walls and dead ends, such as students' reluctance to participate in play in the way that I expect, but I am also aware that if I return to these with new frameworks for thinking they may turn out to be doorways after all... Now I'm starting to realise that a more playful approach to this style research might be to remove myself from the process, and try to capture and understand the transformational things that happen whether I have designed them or not. This will still involve designing playful activities and reflecting on my own actions in some areas, but the emphasis has shifted towards situating these activities within a much bigger context over which I have very little control (something that I imagine is going to be the case for the whole of my academic career). In this way, I am not just*

At this point, I am clearly beginning to understand how play and research overlap with each other, at least. Beyond explicitly introducing playful activities into my research, I am starting to see how play as a mode of experience can itself transform research. This spark of an idea will develop further by the end of the year, but for now it is interesting to note that I describe this as 'removing myself from the process'. Even here, my participation in the process is something that I view as problematic, and in the same way I was absent from my design fiction piece, I am aiming for absence here. Here, play is the opposite of the sort of participation I have been engaging in elsewhere, in which I am in a position of power, and the sole designer of students' experiences.

This seems pessimistic because I am resigned to identifying all the problems I have had with teaching, researching and playing simultaneously, and to examine the ways in which my playful activities have failed to have the intended impact. I have shifted away from utopianism to a perceived realism in my plans, but found that even this does not line up with my expectations, and that my notion of 'balance' between teaching, research and play might not even be possible. However, these thoughts and feelings are a necessary part of the process in that they necessitate a shift in thinking. I am, as a result of this, starting to understand that games are a useful frame through which to view even non-playful activities in teaching and research, which in turn allows me to begin to bring them together. This is effectively a shift from trying to put my initial plans into practice towards actively changing the plan in light of experience.

Returning to the magic circle, it is clear that my participation in teaching, research and play in the first term has moved beyond the theoretical, and I can now be seen as peripherally participating in all three. In the process of doing so, I face a more profound experience of 'the rules' that has begun to constrain my actions, which in turn has made

me more critically aware of the extent to which I am following those rules. Even in the circle in which I was already fairly firmly positioned (play), I find that my participation is challenged. My early embrace of (unrealistic) utopianism feels like a rule-bound behaviour in that I positioned myself as a 'real' play scholar by doing the one thing that all play scholars seem to do.

This critical discomfort stems from the overlaps between magic circles that once appeared to be sites of opportunity and instead seem to be limits. These overlaps are slim, and given that I am already on the periphery of each circle, I am starting to feel that I do not have room to manoeuvre in this hypothetical space. Moving further towards the perceived centre of one circle (i.e. becoming more 'researcher'-like) feels like a risk because it may mean abandoning another circle completely (i.e. being less able to be 'teacher'-like). I already feel precarious thanks to my status as a new teacher and new researcher; the fact that I have designed myself into a position where I have to balance my participation between three distinct activities only increases the sense that working on the edge of teaching and research means risking falling off.

### 7.2.3 Part 3: Opportunism

This final piece of reflective writing was written at the end of my year teaching, following a second term in which I had changed my focus away from my more instrumental use of play in the first term. In the same way that I subsumed my idea of reflective journals into a wider exploration of playful tools, in this term the playful tools themselves became part of a much wider task of encouraging free play through activities in and out of sessions. A word that I used frequently throughout this period was 'opportunism'. I had a sense that it would benefit teaching and research if I was better able to think on my feet and find opportunities for play. I had embraced playfulness in my own practice a little more here as I moved towards analysis of my data; even the pun title 'Course Correction' gives a hint that I am

moving towards new ways of thinking about research practice, though my ideas are still developing.

### *'Course Correction'*

*The Christmas break provided a space to take stock, revisit the ideas behind the playful course outline I had designed and make changes. After the structured approach to play in the classroom I took in the first few months of the foundation degree course, there were a number of things that needed to change, for the sake of both teaching and research:*

- Firstly, the separation of curriculum time between 'playful' and 'non- playful' activities began to feel less like separation and more like unnecessary balkanisation. For those students who were keen to be playful, it felt like we were depriving them of opportunities, and for those who were less keen it felt like playful sessions placed too much pressure on them to engage in play activities that might not have any effect outside of the Thursday morning sessions. My reading around play began to take on the ideas of freedom and compulsion; I was increasingly interested in examining the ways in which choice plays a role in playful activities (both the choice to play in the first place and the choice over what to do within a specific activity).*
- Secondly, it felt as if the first term had been over-planned to some extent. Looking back, individual sessions felt too 'high-stakes', as if they were the only opportunity to experience particular playful activities. Informal discussions with students revealed that there was a sense that, having 'ticked off' a particular playful tool, there was little incentive to go back to it. Each session seemed to have had the intended effect, but there was a lack of emphasis on the common thread running through each of these sessions (despite the fact that we had specifically foregrounded the connection throughout). At the same time the 'high-stakes' feeling (for me at least) seemed to make the sessions less playful (or at least less*



*fun). I wanted to relinquish some of the control I had over each session in order to examine what students might do if left to their own devices.*

- *Thirdly, it was becoming increasingly clear that my initial idea of separating teaching and research as much as possible was not realistic. I had introduced students to the idea of my research, given them participant information sheets to read through and reassured them that any data collected in the sessions would be based entirely on my reflections. At the same time, I had asked for volunteers to take part in separate interviews outside of sessions, and although take up for these had been fairly strong there was definitely a sense that I was hearing the views of only the keenest students. If I wanted to widen the views I was hearing, I would have to change my strategy somewhat. Whilst all this was happening students (even those who were not in my interviews) were clearly keen to know what was going on; they would ask how my research was going, or make suggestions as to things I should look at. I got a sense that the playfulness behind all of the activities we were taking part in was, at the very least, entertaining enough to attract an audience who were now invested in the outcome.*
- *Finally, as we approached the end of the year (although it seems ridiculous to be thinking in this way in January), the ever-present spectre of final assessment hung over everything that took place in each session. As time went on students began to demand more of a focus on the assessment, despite the fact that the requirement for Foundations of Academic Practice is a holistic piece that we had been revisiting frequently over the course of the year. It became difficult to mesh the idea of consequence-free (or at least consequence-light) play from this high-stakes assessment. The old cliché of ‘Will I get marked for this?’ started to come up more and more, even while attendance dropped as some students opted not to engage with sessions as the deadline loomed.*

*Beyond these noticeable issues that needed to be addressed, all of the reading I was doing was changing my initial concepts of play and my desire to put theory into practice (like the 'ideal' Deweyan practitioner) had transformed somewhat. The whole piece of research and practice began to feel less like a designed piece of research, the impact of which I was measuring, and more like an examination of the particular community of students with which I was working. The threads I was choosing to follow up in my reflections and interviews were less about what play 'does' to students in terms of educational outcomes and more about how students play in different ways. For example, there is a deeper issue here across a few of these practical points around the ways in which students follow instructions, and their motivations for taking part in activities. (Reflective Writing Extract, July 2018)*

There is a sense that the key change in this piece is that I have allowed myself to 'let go' of some of my plans; the second bullet point addresses this explicitly but my reading of playfulness is repeatedly at odds with a sense of control that I had previously clung on to in previous reflective writing.

This may, in part, be down to an increased confidence in my abilities as my participation became less peripheral. The clearest indication of this is my use of the pronoun 'we' in this piece. This was not a conscious shift, but looking back now it is clear that I see myself more as a member of a wider team. I have become more aware of my role and what is expected of me. One of the major teaching exercises of the term was an opportunity to run a project on board game design with students, and I have a sense that the team see me as the 'play' person who has the specific expertise to deliver this particular part of the course. What is also clear from my participation in this is the extent to which the project is unplanned. It was not on the cards at the beginning of the year and only really came together in the weeks immediately prior. I am becoming familiar with the working

practices of the community I have entered, and part of this is recognising that colleagues are improvising as much as I am.

Indeed, this ties to the concept of negotiation and renegotiation of meaning and practice, which is central to the model of legitimate peripheral participation. Only at this point in the year am I becoming aware of the extent to which my participation contributes to this process. Previously I have shied away from explicitly negotiating with the 'rules of the game' because I was concerned with following them. I now see that my participation is a form of negotiation in itself, and that I am able to make the most of this. I am even negotiating with some of my own self-imposed rules. I am shifting the bounds of my research project, reacting to new information and allowing ideas to run their course. This, in turn, encourages participation from others. The final interviews of the year are better attended and more diverse than they have been, partly because I am open with students that their participation can be impromptu. I am using play more as a method in interviews. I bring bags of dice to randomise questions (with a contingency plan to cover the issues I need to examine) and make a game of discussing participation. This in turn attracts new participants. Play is a performance in which they want to get involved.

This sort of approach would have been odds with the ideas around peripheral participation that I held previously, as it seems too risky to open myself up to chaos like this. In a way I now feel safe to return to some of my early ideas of free play. My approach to this comes across in two specific teaching episodes. In the first, I returned to the idea of skills for employability as we had discussed in the session on creativity. In this session, we examined Meyers-Briggs personality types through the lens of a Harry Potter-themed internet personality quiz, and discussed how different personality types can contribute to an education context. This was a playful way into the topic that did not alienate those students who were seriously thinking about future career pathways. Importantly, though, I presented some playfully provocative questions about the origin of the online quizzes my

students had completed, and how their use is paid for in education. This led to a wider discussion about the role of technology in education, which the students themselves moved towards the sort of discussion of neoliberal institutions that I was simultaneously writing about in my early literature review drafts.

In a second episode, we continued this discussion by looking directly at preparation for job interviews (through the theme of 'presenting yourself'). In this session, I gave students a selection of real interview questions to ask each other, some more 'playful' than others (i.e. 'What would your superpower be?' or 'If you could only eat one food for the rest of your life, what would it be?'). The students had free rein whether to opt in to the 'serious' or 'playful' questions. In this way, I tried to create an opportunity for free play to occur without mandating it, and individual students found the level at which they were comfortable during the session. Again, discussion eventually shifted towards a critical understanding of the problem when I introduced Gee's (2004) idea of 'shape shifting portfolio people', which emphasises the way in which students will be required to sell themselves as workers in the future. As with previous sessions earlier in the year, this topic raised the idea that playfulness might be a useful skill in education, but also enabled (some) students to begin to think about the whole structure of a socioeconomic system which requires them to 'sell themselves'.

In both of these incidents it is difficult to untangle exactly what is happening and who is leading the process. Late on in the year, students are developing more complex ideas about working in education based on their experiences of the course, but I am also introducing more freeform activities that invite a sense of critical play. In making an explicit link between play and criticality, I am beginning to undermine some of the arguments I made earlier in the year, and introducing 'live' ideas from my own research into the classroom. At the same time, I am clearly starting to think about how I am going to write about this in my thesis, which in turn affects my decisions about teaching. The final

paragraph of my reflective piece extract pre-empts some of the arguments from the previous chapter. Similarly, during the job interview session students had started writing up their FoAP portfolios, which may have contributed directly to their critical understanding of the concept of 'portfolio people'. This mess of interactions between teaching practice, research and writing seemed to affect everyone in the room equally, and the lines of influence are difficult to identify.

My repeated use of 'we' seems vital to understanding what really changed here. In previous pieces of reflection, I have tried to make myself disappear, either by retreating after the design process or by trying to encourage free play that does not require my intervention. To some extent in this third piece of reflection I have also disappeared, but only in as much as I have become part of a 'we'. Looking back in light of my literature review, I realise that this is the sense of participation that I have been examining all along; becoming a *part* of a wider community and being able to affect change in that group. In fact, there may be several 'we's at play here; I use it to refer to my colleagues, but also to the group of students I taught (and the subset of that group that I researched with). All of these can be seen as magic circles of participation which encompass members who participate in different ways, but importantly I have placed myself at their intersection. In each circle, in changing what I do, I change what 'we' do. In this way, I begin to drag the circles closer to each other around my own actions, which in turn makes my position less peripheral and less precarious.

This is a return to some of my initial instincts about play, but fed through my experiences as a newcomer to the community. Where I once placed trust in the activities I designed to deliver particular playful outcomes, I now place trust in the other members of the community (the students) to work with the opportunities for play I provide. They negotiate as much as I do, and we reach solutions to problems through collaboration. I stop worrying if I have the 'correct' answer to the question of introducing play into the

classroom. Similarly, they (at least start to) see that I do not have all of the answers to the question of what work in the field of education involves (although as Point 4 of the reflective extract shows, we all clearly remain constrained by the assessment process' insistence that there should be). Play's role in this was two-fold. It suggested some alternatives to the established 'correct' answers to the problems my students and I were examining, but it also provided a context in which it was safer to move beyond these established answers.

#### 7.2.4 Viewing the vignettes together

Presented neatly and chronologically, these vignettes illustrate a shift from being pulled in many directions by the different magic circles in which I was participating to actively pulling the magic circles towards each other. In using this metaphor, I am trying to demonstrate that teaching, research and play can effectively be seen as facets of the same activity, and that through combining them we are better able to understand how they might be improved or transformed. Importantly, it was play that enabled this in my experience. It was not just a solution that provided educational and research techniques but a complex additional set of rules that forced me to re-examine my understanding of other activities and reinvigorated my response to established practice.

Of course, in reality, the chronology was not this neat, and the shifting circles coexisted with my sense of precarity and peripherality for most of the year. I set out to disrupt my context using play from the start, and often braced myself to take risks precisely because of this. Similarly, in writing my thesis I am now probably more aware than ever of the extent to which my future career hinges upon my present peripheral participation, and as the year came to a close and students concentrated on assessment I found play starting to loosen its grip (it is difficult to assess portfolios in a genuinely playful way).

If the magic circles of teaching, research and play overlap to the extent that they encompass identical activities, then the difference becomes a matter of modes of experience and participation. I can play the roles of educator, researcher and player simultaneously, and switch between these roles by shifting the focus of my participation. Participation in all of these activities becomes less about the ideal 'centre' (if it even existed in the first place), and more about how my own experiences shift the magic circles in which

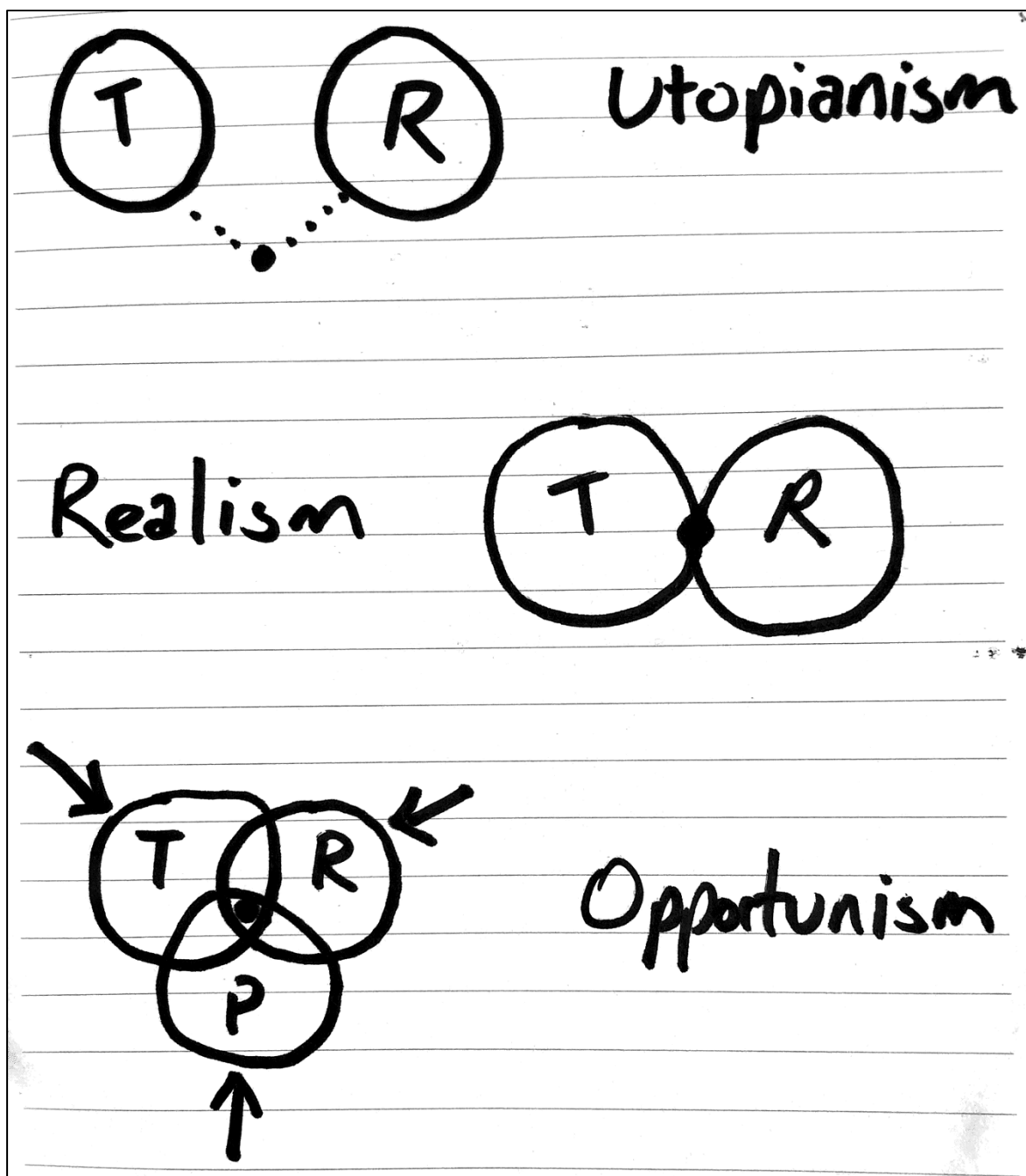


Figure 7A: Moving magic circles: my relationship to teaching (T), research (R) and play (P)

I participate and change the experiences of others. This way of understanding teaching, research and play requires a more holistic approach to understanding all three activities in the context of HE. How are we to understand these activities if they are so entwined with each other?

### **7.3 Teaching and research: Playful metaphors for participation**

#### **7.3.1 Educator/researcher as designer: Replicable, separate, hygienic**

One of the clearest threads from all three vignettes is the way in which I implicitly attempted to position myself as a particular type of educational researcher. This comes across in the way in which I tried to remove myself from the process early on, and also in the way that I consider the educational and research activities that I delivered over the course of the year in terms of their impact on students' soft-skill development. In a way, 'designer' might be an appropriate label for the role that I saw myself as occupying in the overlap between the magic circles of teaching and research. I had internalised the idea that, as I was working with games in education then I must have been thinking like a designer.

The lineage of this idea is clear. Earlier in my literature review I made the connection between games-based learning and ed-tech literature in general, and highlighted that much of the literature on play and games in education is focused on sharing tools for designing educational games. This could even be said for educational literature more generally. Going all the way back to Dewey (and further), educationalists have shared ideas on design, especially when working in innovative areas. Elsewhere, in my methodology, I drew upon design-based research, which formalises this approach to some extent by explicitly placing the educational design process at the centre of research. Having said this, methodology in general can be seen as a design process. The implication of any conventional research method is that it is a design that can be redeployed in appropriate contexts. All of this comes to the fore when considered in light of the logic of problems and



solutions I critiqued in my literature review; educators and researchers design solutions to perceived problems. This is particularly the case when it comes to games because these are also designed activities. Having established that I was using games in educational research, I grasped on to the role of 'designer' almost automatically because that is how so much of the literature is positioned.

Viewed in this way, participation in teaching and research are connected because both involve using a set of tools to design solutions to problems. Educational researchers are designers who follow a set process, produce replicable outcomes in a clean way, and disappear behind their designs so much that they are independent of the context in which they work. I want to stress here that I am not arguing that is actually how designers work in any field, but rather an idealised version of how the design process works. Indeed, this goes back to the 'inheritance of hygiene' raised by Law (2004), which can be seen in both research and education. He argues that processes like research are too easily mechanised which means ignoring the vagueness, indeterminacy and mess in the world.

### 7.3.2 Alternative metaphors

The movement between the three vignettes I discussed is partly a story of coming face-to-face with this mess and allowing it to complicate my practice. Indeed, it could be argued that mess forced my response of drawing the magic circles towards each other. My idealised image was troubled and transformed by experience, and this in turn encouraged me to look for alternative ways of participating.

'Designer' is not the only role that combines play, research and education. For the remainder of this section I outline three alternative conceptualisations that enable an alternative approach. Each of these shares elements with the idea of research and education as a design activity, but is complicated by the specifics of context. Each uses metaphors of games and play specifically drawn from contemporary culture that have not

been considered in the field of HE. In drawing upon these ideas, I begin to address the core question of how autoethnographic research turns into something beyond the author's own experiences. These metaphors demonstrate an understanding that stems from my autoethnographic analysis but which builds into concepts that may be useful across the field of HE, even if they do not provide 'solutions' that will transplant to any other field.

Many of the participatory forms of education and research I outlined in my literature review and methodology chapters emerged in reaction to an imbalance of power between teachers and students, and between researchers and their participants. My experiences of the year have confirmed that these relationships are fundamentally affected by this imbalance, even when practitioners deliberately try to undermine and change them through participatory practice. For example, my frustrations with students not participating in the way I intended (both in terms of teaching and research) indicates that I had some ideal in my head that was based on fundamental assumptions I made about what it is to be a student. Bringing play into the equation complicated the issue further; it brought with it questions of compulsion around the idea of play as a voluntary activity and games as designed experiences, and highlighted that participation in HE sits on a blurred border between compulsory and voluntary, especially when we are focusing on widening participation research in particular.

These metaphors play with this blur (and others) by describing the experience of researching, educating and playing within this specific context. They capture both the opportunities and difficulties with participating in play, as well as the more mundane aspects that we might otherwise ignore when we focus entirely on transferable successes. I draw comparison between the mundane aspects of both games and participation in HE, as well as placing these metaphors within my wider conceptual model of the magic circle. In this way, I am following Gee's (2006:58) suggestion of using games as 'equipment for living' that provide us with new analytical tools. Ultimately, these metaphors start to

answer one of the overarching philosophical questions that I raised in the introduction of this thesis; if education is a game, what sort of game is it? This theme will extend into the next chapter, but for now I offer three metaphors as suggestions, with some additional autoethnographic reflections.

### 7.3.3 Educator/researcher as dungeonmaster: Participating, improvising, personalising

The mismatch between idea and delivery is a common feature of any process involving design, but in the case of digital computer games the design process is hidden from the user to some extent. Game development is obfuscated by the technical process of coding which mean that digital games are often presented as a finished product with no obvious design history.

As an alternative, we can turn to tabletop role-playing games (RPGs), the most well-known example of which is *Dungeons and Dragons* (D&D: Wizards of the Coast, 2014). Although based on rules and materials which are developed and designed (and owned) by a specific company, individual instances of these games are run by a 'dungeonmaster' (DM) who takes this framework and designs a bespoke campaign for the specific people who are playing. They then deliver this campaign on the fly, improvising responses to the players' actions as they interact with the design. This is a process of *active* design as a form of participation. The DM does not create the experience and then sit back as the players play it; instead half of the real work of design takes place around the table as the DM interacts with players. This process depends upon getting to know players personally, understanding their playstyles and preferences, and working with them to develop new ideas. In the same way that there are playstyles, there are 'styles' of working as a DM: some are accused of 'railroading' players through a strict plot; others are entirely improvisatory and ignore the rules; and most are somewhere in the middle. The DM is also an authority figure. Although all players will have an interpretation of the rules and will argue over these, it is ultimately

the DM who arbitrates disputes and decides on how rules will be applied. Some players will 'play against the game', but a good DM will have strategies to incorporate this playstyle rather than limiting it.

This approach to design and delivery has clear analogues with teaching and research. The curriculum as delivered is inherited (from the institution, or more experienced colleagues), and individual educators put their spin on it in the classroom. Similarly, research fits within a tradition that requires practitioners to build upon prior examples. In both cases, plans are adapted in the field to an extent, although different individuals will adapt in different ways and will have their own style of interpreting the rules. In the best cases, these interpretations will consider the needs and personalities of the people participating. This all seems fairly self-evident, but this metaphor also demonstrates that the blurred role between designer and player in *D&D* has an equivalent in education settings. The DM is a participant, immersed in the game just as much as any player, and will shift between playing the game and managing it, depending on the state of the game. Similarly, there is a blurred role for the teacher and researcher, in that they do not just sit back and allow plans to happen. Importantly, this blur is where the creativity happens, and if they are able to operate at the level of other participants then improvisation and opportunism become more available as options. Again, in many situations these are roles with authority, either in terms of expertise or in terms of management of participants' experiences (often both), but engaging in these terms depends upon making oneself more vulnerable to criticism from other participants and developing a willingness to change. The key difference, of course, is that *D&D* has been designed as a toolkit which is to be adapted. Educators and researchers need to take this attitude to overstuffed curricula and foundational texts which seem unshakeable.

The key takeaway from this metaphor is that it is increasingly difficult to see education and research design in a purely technocratic light. There is so much going on in

these processes that feels organic, analogue and immersed in context. Even when designs (or games) have been meticulously developed before use, these plans need to be applied in a way which is responsive to the environment, and this requires real participation from educators and researchers. Again, play provides a model for this through its ability to unlock improvisation and spontaneity.

#### 7.3.4 Educator/researcher as player of a (bad) open-world game: Finding the fun, opportunism, breaking the game

Moving further away from design, we can understand play, research and teaching as a game that the educator/researcher is playing, and in this case a particular genre of game seems an apt metaphor. Open-world games (like *Assassins Creed* and *BotW*, both mentioned previously) are defined by their open maps which often contain every activity in the game. The player is free to explore and move from activity to activity without the constraint of linear plot. Instead narrative is delivered through quests that appear on the map along with sidequests and other activities. As in the real world, players are given free rein to follow the path they want to follow. The best open-world games (*BotW* being the case in point) have been designed to signpost opportunities for play through subtly guiding players from challenge to challenge. The Plateau mentioned above is an open-world within an open-world, precisely managed to allow players to practice all of the skills they will need to play the rest of the game.

Most open-world games, though, are not this good. They often pile on skills and activities with no clear consideration of the way in which activities might flow into each other. As I mentioned at the close of Chapter 2, players are often forced to ‘find the fun’ in these games by deliberately ignoring the plot and working outside the bounds of what might be considered legitimate play, even to the extent of breaking the game. In this sense, teaching and research may not just be like playing an open-world game, but a *badly-*

*designed* open world game. They present what pragmatists might call a problematic situation in which there is no clear pathway ahead of the participant, but instead a mess of activities that can be tackled in any order. What is overwhelming about these tasks is the sense that anything could happen, and that participation in them is unclear. This mess is evocative of the beginning of the project of teaching and researching simultaneously. There seems to be too much to do and not enough time to do it.

Here, the game provides the mess, but this is mess that might have been designed by someone else. Thus research and teaching practice is tied into a much wider social context over which the researcher has little control. Play provides an escape, but a necessary one. In opportunistically looking for activities that are off the expected path, I was able to discover opportunities that linked back to my research, but which otherwise would not have occurred. My frequent retreat into 'sidequests', in both teaching and research, was a way to reconfigure my overall approach to the task at hand. For example, sitting and counting the number of times the revolving doors in the building malfunctioned in an hour at the suggestion of my students was not within the initial scope of my research project, but it gave me an understanding of the ways in which the physical space of the building affects participation, which became a valuable strand in later interviews. I could have ignored this 'quest', or spent just five minutes on it, but it ended up being far more worthwhile than other more 'central' opportunities. The origins of this were in mess created by other people; an idealised design for education and research might not have captured this.

One of the key things I saw when examining how students understand games is that they are fairly mundane cultural artefacts even when they produce magical experiences, and it could be argued that open world video games are the most mundane, magical game experiences out there, simultaneously boring and fantastic. Similarly, under the model of the magic circle, participation in playful teaching and research is both magical and

mundane. It can often feel like one is going through the motions, or hewing too closely to the 'rules of the game' of teaching and research. The magic is in 'finding the fun', in discovering activities peripheral to the task at hand which can illuminate and transform it. In this respect, play becomes a different way of experiencing the acts of teaching and research, or a way of putting pragmatism into action. It is, in effect, a subversive and creative playstyle similar to those outlined in the previous chapter.

#### 7.3.5 Educator/research as fan: Supporting, critiquing, conflicted

As video games have grown as a cultural phenomenon, the idea of participatory culture as developed by Jenkins (1992) has become more relevant to studies of play, especially given the rise of phenomena like 'Let's Play' videos, Twitch streams and e-sports. Using these technologies, playing a game can now be a performance, and this brings with it a new set of participants who have different ways of participating in play, from drawing fan-art to collating statistics in wikis (Newman, 2008). Of course, this idea is nothing new. One only needs to look at the supporters of sports teams and fans of celebrities to see similar behaviours going back for over a century. However, what might be different about contemporary fan culture is the extent to which it is a creative activity which loops back round to the game itself. Games fans do not just play games but 'support' whole games or game studios, and games are now effectively developed in conversation with fan communities.

This is not necessarily always a positive relationship; it can be frustrating to watch your team lose, or to find out that a game in your favourite franchise has been mauled by critics, and games developers now find themselves on the receiving end of 'toxic fandom' if they make missteps in the eyes of fans. Similarly, some communities make a game out of 'breaking' games, looking for glitches that allow for speedruns or pushing unfinished or poorly designed games to their limits to create abstract videos. In all of these cases, what

is classed as 'play' is increasingly vague. It feels as if one is participating in play even when one is doing something 'non-playful', like collating a spreadsheet of statistics, or even passive, like watching a Let's Play video. What is important is that these activities take place within a wider ecosystem of play.

Using this as a metaphor, if the students are read as the players, the game is not designed by the educator/researcher. Instead, the educator/researcher acts as a *fan* of the game of HE and participates creatively through this relationship to the game. This directly inverts the relationship seen in the previous metaphor, in which the educator/researcher is seen as a position of authority. Instead the metaphor acknowledges the power that students themselves have in their relationship to learning, and the extent to which they control their response to activities at university. These responses may be dependent upon the actions of authority figures, but may equally be dependent on many other factors. The metaphor also acknowledges that students have a life outside of the lecture theatre, or the interview room, and that their stories continue well after the academic year or the research study has finished. Educators and researchers' participation in their lives is, by its nature, peripheral. They are involved only in as much as they work around students' more central participation. Researchers in particular deal with the idea of being an 'outsider' to the communities they work with, and this metaphor takes this idea seriously, especially as there is yet another blur between insider and outsider when they are also teaching.

This metaphor unlocks an idea that I struggled with throughout my time in the field whenever I was confronted with students who responded 'creatively' to (or ignored) my teaching. I felt the tension between my role as an educator and my role as a researcher in that part of me was disappointed that students did not respond in the way I intended, whilst the other was fascinated by their actual responses. By seeing myself as a 'fan' of what the students were doing I was able to feel both of these emotions at the same time. Play is entertaining to watch, and similarly it was 'entertaining' to see students mess



around with plans that I had spent a year developing as long as I distanced myself from my role as educator. In the same way that participatory culture might be seen as a form of vicarious play, there was a sense of vicarious play here as I saw students embracing chaos in ways that I could not. They appropriated the activities and resources that I created in my teaching, and the questions I had during research sessions, and in turn I appropriated their responses into my playful research.

This is another blurred, unclear relationship, but it allows a sense of realism about the role of teaching and research from a students' perspective, as well as a sense for the educator/researcher of the value of looking at success in a different way. I am not arguing that educators should support what their students do under all circumstances (this would require a complete abdication of the sort of moral responsibility I have argued for elsewhere). However, I would argue that educators and researchers should, like some students, 'play the game' and say 'it is what it is' when it comes to students' responses to their interventions. This involves moving away from questions of whether responses are the ones intended, and towards understanding how even negative or destructive responses are a part of a much bigger picture.

#### **7.4 Conclusion: The power of metaphors**

What these new metaphors have in common is a sense that participation in education as a researcher and educator is complicated by the overlap between different practices, but that this overlap is a site for potential creativity, especially when play is introduced into the equation. By moving away from my internalised assumption that the overlap between play, research and teaching *must* be design, I am better able to conceptualise, and eventually transform, my own practice. In a way, this reflects some of the more philosophical changes I have seen in my PhD work. For example, although I understood Dewey as an educational advocate, only after playing with meaning in this way do I understand how this advocacy

stems from his more fundamental beliefs. This is the role that reflexive research approaches like autoethnography can play in studying education. They turn reflective writing into theory, and vice versa, and allow researchers to use their own experiences in a way that goes beyond a clinical separation of the research context and the world beyond.

At the start of this chapter I posed the question of how, if at all, play transforms teaching and research in HE. The straightforward answer to this question, which has begun to be addressed by other authors featured in my literature review, is that using playful methods enables a more participatory approach to teaching and research. In the best cases this creates new sites of participation in which educators and students are empowered to 'change the game' through research and play. For those both educating and researching, this is particularly powerful because of the way in which play enables them to participate more centrally and draw disparate activities together by treating them as the same game. My autoethnographic work in this chapter suggests that this process started to occur during my year of working with students, though it also demonstrates that this was a precarious and risky position in which to work. My development as a newcomer to teaching and research in university was the story of negotiation with the established rules through participation. Play played a central role in this negotiation process.

Beyond transforming the activity of teaching and research, play has also transformed my understanding of these activities through providing new metaphors for the ways in which teaching and research overlap with each other. This overlap was easily identified through my participation, as it was the very thing that contributed to my sense of precariousness, but having identified it I needed to consider what it was actually *doing* in terms of my understanding. The metaphors I work with in this chapter demonstrate that there is productive potential in the overlap between play, research and education, but also show that any transformation is more complicated than straightforward *improvement*. What the metaphors have in common with each other is a sense of play's situatedness, and

its potential to challenge, appropriate and bend the rules of its social context. This central point will prove vital to my argument in my next chapter as I start to consider play's potential to transform the philosophy of participation in HE. Even this metaphorical transformation of the understanding of teaching and research can have an impact on practice.

A final moment of reflection: whenever I tried to describe what I was doing to friends who were familiar with games, I invariably went back to *Breath of the Wild* in order to capture the kind of experiences that I wanted to create through my teaching and research. Whenever I tried to describe what I was doing to friends in education, it was more difficult because many of the analogues did not already exist. In this sense, it is clear that I was drawn to play and games as a metaphor for education precisely because I have already had experiences of play. Pragmatists argue that the way in which we experience the world is dependent on our prior experiences, but we cannot 'un-have' an experience. Critical reflection might involve bracketing or underplaying previous experiences in order to gain some semblance of objectivity, but ultimately every experience we have has a lineage of other experiences behind it. Engaging in autoethnography forces one to wallow in these experiences (and embrace the subjectivity this implies) whilst simultaneously demanding a more critical approach to this subjectivity. I wanted to emulate games from the start because I enjoyed them and could see their potential. Having been through the process I am better able to identify the specific aspects that make games so powerful, but I am increasingly convinced that what matters more is honesty about how games have unlocked particular ways of thinking, and how these have influenced my journey through education and research. This is play's part in my pragmatism. It has given me a more diverse range of experiences on which to draw when negotiating meaning.

## 8 – Total Play!

### 8.1 Introduction

In the previous two chapters I have used students' and my own experiences to consider the impact of play on educational practice. In this chapter, I turn to the third, more theoretical research question of how play might transform our philosophy of education, and I develop the idea of Total Play as a potential response to this. Total Play moves beyond playstyles to become an epistemological stance on education. This builds on a theme that has already begun to appear in the thesis, that play does not just change what we do but how we think.

I begin the chapter with a passage that is reminiscent of the vignettes from the previous chapter, but which has a different role. Where the past vignettes were lifted from reflective piece I wrote during the year, this piece has been written specifically for inclusion in the thesis and to explain the roots of my conception of Total Play. I realise that using up words on this is an indulgence, but I hope that at this point in the thesis I can cash in on my argument so far in order to jump forward two steps. The rest of the chapter allows me to step back to data in order to reinforce the concept of Total Play from within.

I identify nascent characteristics of Total Play in the data used in the previous two chapters, in terms of the position-switching demonstrated by students and my own developing sense of 'totalness'. However, I also find that Total Play's development was limited by contextual factors that may seem insurmountable, namely the social relationships at work within the student community and the wider institutional factors that constrain students' and educators' risk-taking. There is value in studying Total Play's possibility, though, and I close out the chapter by considering the aspects that could be built upon in the future, especially where they connect to the theme of widening participation.

The logic of this chapter is that is essentially a dialogue I am having with myself, in that I vacillate between the possibilities of Total Play and its paradoxical impossibility. In this sense, the chapter continues a theme of incorporating play in Deweyan pragmatism in order to create new experiences and meanings. These meanings are troubled by reality, but also trouble it in return, and this can be seen as a contribution to a transformed philosophy of education.

## 8.2 Total Football!

*'Swapping parts and roles is not acting,  
But rather emancipation from expectation  
Collectivism and autonomy are not mutually exclusive  
Those who find discomfort in your goals of liberation will be issued no apology  
And fuck Tom Brady!'  
Total Football by Parquet Courts (2018)*

*When I started working towards my PhD, I decided to take up running again. I had run in the past and needed something that would keep me fit, provide some headspace and (perhaps more importantly) did not cost any money. I started to attend the parkrun in Longford Park on Saturday mornings, largely because I found a new sense of competitiveness and I run faster when I am around other people. Each week, a few hundred people would meet at Longford Stadium for a five-kilometre run. It was a good way to ensure that I ran regularly and kept track of my times.*

*Saturday is also my day for listening to new music, and one weekend in May, Parquet Courts' new album Wide Awake! had been released, so I had it loaded onto my phone. As soon as the air horn blared to start the run, I pressed play and joined the mass of people to complete a lap of the stadium track before heading out into the park.*

*Except I had real trouble running. Parquet Courts have a tendency to play messily, switching time-signatures and tempos at random, and the opening track of this album was*

*no different. My legs naturally tried to match the tempo of the music but kept dropping out of sync. I found that I was distracted by the lyrics; lead singer Andrew Savage was ranting about politics, about collectivism and liberation. But the title of the track was Total Football. The sense of other (fitter) people's bodies moving in a more coordinated way than mine made me feel self-conscious; this song about sport was undermining my ability to participate in sport.*

*I found later that the song is not really about sport. The whole album is an argument for political participation and awareness of the world (hence Wide Awake!), and the opening track lays out this theme. And then there's that final line. I am aware of Tom Brady, the quarterback for the New England Patriots, thanks to my vague understanding of American football (which has largely stemmed from Donald Trump's overblown backlash against black players refusing to stand for the national anthem). When I get home, I look up an interview where Andrew Savage says:*

*He, in the context of that song, is an archetype for something that is becoming a bit tired in that people are starting to reject. There's 'Tom Brady the player' which is unpopular because he plays for the New England Patriots which is like a powerhouse team but then there's 'Tom Brady the symbol', which is what I'm talking about. The lone wolf, alpha male, quarterback idea of traditional independent American masculinity that we are all rejecting in that song. It's Tom Brady the concept. Every sport has their Tom Brady; every civilization has their Tom Brady. (Quoted in T. Smith, 2018: Online)*

*But it's possible to dig deeper; in a game that is all about celebrity quarterbacks, Tom Brady is perhaps the biggest celebrity quarterback. He is also a supporter and personal friend of Trump (who could be seen as a 'quarterback' President). Parquet Courts are making connections here between the real Tom Brady and a conceptual one, and using Total Football as a metaphor for a better way of doing things.*

*A few weeks later, running on my own fairly late at night, a track comes on Apple Music's recommended shuffle that is disorientating for different reasons. It is a slow, quiet electronic piece which centres around a spoken word sample:*

*Skateboarding is not a hobby. And it is not a sport. Skateboarding is a way of learning how to redefine the world around you. For most people, when they saw a swimming pool, they thought, 'Let's take a swim.' But I thought, 'Let's ride it.' When they saw the curb or a street, they would think about driving on it. I would think about the texture. I slowly developed the ability to look at the world through totally different means. (Ian MacKaye, quoted in Library of Congress, 2013: Online)*

*This quote, from the lead singer of Fugazi (another leftist American punk band) makes a connection between politics and sport again. I've been exploring the idea of play as an epistemological stance, and here is an encapsulation of this; a playful activity as a way of experiencing the world and transforming meaning.*

*Running, American football, Donald Trump, skateboarding. It feels as if all of these things that existed outside the scope of my project are now beginning to encroach upon it. Even my distractions from research and writing are becoming part of it. Is this all a coincidence? Or have I gone so far down the rabbit hole of play that I'm reading everything as data?*

#### 8.2.1 Aspects of Total Football

This story was written in pieces as I began to draw together my ideas around Total Football and its links to my thesis, and whilst I am not presenting it entirely as data, I want to interrogate some of the ideas I have raised from a more critical perspective. Throughout the story, I was inspired to go away and look something up, to engage in research off the back of a spark. This section is effectively the result of some of these moments of inspiration. Despite the Parquet Courts song being about American football, Total Football as an idea has its roots in association football as played in Europe, specifically in the

Netherlands (where it is called *totaalvoetbal*) in the 1970s. Once more, football is not a sport that I was overly familiar with prior to doing this research, but some of the key features of this initial idea became central to my thinking on the topic. Many of my references come from Winner's (2000) cultural analysis of Total Football. Whilst this lends itself to a specific reading of the concept, it is useful in that he highlights not just the technical aspects of Total Football but also its historical and social context. Based on this analysis and others, I identified the following aspects of Total Football.

*Total Football is 'swapping parts and roles'*

The most technical definition of Total Football describes it as a strategic and tactical approach comprising of 'a fluid system in which any player (other than the goalie) can assume any role on the team, be it an attacker, a midfielder or a defender' (Jensen, 2014: 721). This implies a strategy in which players respond to teammates switching by moving into the role they occupied previously. This looks chaotic to the opposition, but is an effective form of aggressive play against which it is difficult to defend. Playing in this way transforms its context; without the expectation to behave in a particular way, the whole game is changed.

*Total Football is collective*

It may seem self-evident given that football is a team game, but Total Football is dependent on collective activity. It is only viable as a strategy because individuals can rely on others to shift positions around them as they themselves shift. This does not mean that individual brilliance is discouraged, but rather that it is only possible in an environment in which a collective spirit supports it. As the song puts it, 'collectivism and autonomy are not mutually exclusive' and being a team-player does not mean subsuming oneself to the needs of the team but rather treating the team as a context for creativity.



### *Total Football is political*

Building on this sense of collectivism, it is easier to see how Total Football has ties to political ideas around collectivism and individualism. Unlike American football, in which players tend to have a fixed-role which enables the practice of 'quarterbacking' and values some individuals over others, under Total Football individual actions are of value only in as much as they contribute to a wider collective activity. Theoretically, there can be no 'quarterbacks' in Total Football, even if in practice particularly skilled players like Johan Cruyff became symbols for the style of play. All players contribute according to their skillset. Beyond this there are more fundamental links to politics. Definitions of Total Football often refer to it as an ideology or a philosophy as much as a strategy. Winner (2000) argues that Total Football is a product of Dutch political culture of the 1960s and 70s, which encouraged a participatory form of democracy at all levels of life. For example, Ajax players voted on decisions like the nomination of team captain at the start of each season, which would then set the tone for the way in which players interacted with each other (and which infamously led to incumbent captain Cruyff's exit from the team and the country in 1973-4).

### *Total Football is 'total'*

Again, stating that Total Football is 'total' might seem obvious, but it is an idea worth exploring. Beyond politics, Winner's analysis of Dutch football also covers art, architecture, physical geography and politics, and he interviews people who work in these fields who claim an influence from Total Football. Total Football's totalness, then, extends beyond the pitch and can be seen as encompassing life outside of the game. Beyond a football strategy, it incorporates a political outlook, an aesthetic stance, even a philosophy of life for some people. This is, effectively, a Deweyan pragmatist way of seeing play as a mode of

experience; experiences in one aspect of life shape other experiences elsewhere. This may explain why Total Football has such valid links to punk music, leftist politics, skateboarding and beyond. In thinking with Total Football in mind, one is already predisposed to extend its totalness into other areas, and to draw those areas back in. Total Football cannot be confined to the pitch.

*Total Football is utopian (but inconsistent)*

Total Football's most famous public outing as a strategy was when it was utilised by the Netherlands in the 1974 World Cup, a tournament in which they notoriously lost to West Germany in the final despite playing what many still see as excellent football. This inconsistency seems to be part of its charm. There is a romance to the way in which Total Football is remembered by those who played it and saw it played. Part of this is down to the way in which football works as a game. As with most sports, there is a very clear rule about what constitutes success (scoring more goals than the other team), but there are other ways to admire play. People praise others' play as beautiful, or fair, or dogged in the face of defeat. Total Football has been described as paradigmatic of 'beautiful football' (Richards, quoted in Jensen, 2014: 721). These almost aesthetic judgments of play demonstrate that it can be experienced and valued in different ways. On top of this, there is an air of romance and nostalgia around Total Football's historical context that makes it even more admired. Winner interviews several Dutch people who reminisce about the political environment of the 1960s and 70s. It seems almost utopian, and Total Football is as a contributing factor to this utopia.

*Total Football is inscrutable*

Despite it being used so widely, it is still unclear where Total Football really came from, or what made it work when it did. Many of the players that Winner interviews make it seem almost accidental that it existed in the first place, or say did not realise what they were

doing until they looked back at their successes. This also comes across in the way in which Ajax players were particularly superstitious and went through precise rituals before each match (Winner, 2000: 42). It was unclear exactly what it was that contributing to success when it occurred, perhaps because of the perceived chaos on and off the pitch. Again, the story of my encounter with Total Football ties into this. Even now, looking back, I am not entirely sure if I discovered it because I was listening to that particular song at that particular time, or whether this merely provided a metaphor for thoughts I was already thinking.

#### *Total Football is treated as a solution*

Even given this sense of mystery, Total Football has been treated as if it is a replicable solution in football. The 'Cryffian' approach to playing and strategizing has been used successfully by others, including Jose Mourinho and Pep Guardiola (Wilson, 2018). However, some have argued that the spirit of Total Football has been lost over time. It seems self-evident that any method of creative and abstract thinking becomes staid when it is used as a system, especially when it is so tied up with democratic values and a transforming context. Former Ajax player Barry Hulshoff believes that Total Football has been subject to 'over-intellectualisation by those who don't understand how it functioned' (Winner, 2000: 40). I realise that, in raising Total Football in a PhD thesis about educational participation, I may be falling into this trap. However, even here I see potential crossovers with my experiences of the year, especially my frustrations with the logic of problems and solutions. It is clear from the example of Total Football that there is a difference between a strategy that grows organically in a context, and one which is transplanted and adapted to breed success.

### 8.2.2 Total Football as a playstyle

By now, I hope that it is clear where I am going with this thread. Total Football embodies many of the aspects of play that I have highlighted throughout my argument, but importantly it foregrounds particular aspects that lend themselves to a specific type of play, which might even be considered a playstyle in its own right, and one which might transform our understandings of participation. Feeding this conception back into the conceptual model of the magic circle may help to apply Total Football to a different context, so I want to briefly return to this model and apply the themes that the magic circle of participation suggests.

Total Football players had a complicated relationship with the rules of the game. Within the game of association football they were not doing anything against the rules, and this is why it worked as a strategy. However, there is a definite sense that they were confounding some unwritten rules about how the game *should* be played. In this way, the rules of the game were simultaneously (and paradoxically) limiting, because they constrained player behaviour, and empowering because they provided a context for subversion to have an impact. Playing Total Football does not literally change the rules of the game, but the act of subverting norms transforms people's (i.e. other players, officials, fans) interpretation of those rules. It expands the notion of what is possible within the context.

The magic circle surrounding Total Football was blurry and incredibly permeable, as demonstrated by the way in which it leaked into other aspects of life. Total Football could not be confined to the pitch. In this way, players and fans found opportunities to use the rules of one game to change the rules of other games; if they could play football differently, what else could change? At the very least, every activity seemed to become a metaphor for every other activity. In this way, the overlaps between different magic circles moved with the participants as they empowered themselves to play across contexts. Even though

their participation depended on others, Total Football required players to push overlaps with other contexts even further, and to put themselves in the centre of their own magic circle of participation. In this sense, Total Football could not be forced by rules or strategy but depended somewhat on the choices that an individual makes.

Total Football's inexplicability is part of its magic, but this also comes across in position-switching, which seems more chaotic and unpredictable than other forms of play. Magic also comes across in its paradoxical nature; that a collective activity provided a context for individual brilliance, or that a brilliant strategy could produce inconsistent and disappointing results. There is a sense that, especially in early experiments with position switching, players really were *playing* in the sense that they were playing-a-role. In the same way that young children experiment with different roles when they are at play, players engaging in Total Football take on the roles of others as a way to discover new ways of participating. This required them to take themselves less seriously, and to allow things to happen which might be out of their control. It also requires an openness to failure and getting things wrong; one cannot be expected to be an expert in a particular role if one has only just taken it on.

As soon as Total Football becomes a way of thinking about play/participation, as well as a way of playing/participating, we can return to some of the ideas from literature which might illuminate it further. The conception of Total Football as transformative, empowering and chaotic certainly lines up with other theories of play. The two that stand out are those of Malaby (2007) and De Koven (2013), which I linked in the literature review because of their emphasis on the way in which play is a socially negotiated process involving improvisation and change. De Koven's 'coliberation', through which players free themselves from the confines of the game by playing together and 'changing the game', lines up fairly strongly with Total Football (though I would argue that De Koven's freedom

from the rules is impossible given that these new processual systems involve new sets of rules).

These ideas are summarised in Figure 8A, which is an extension of Figure 6B, that outlined the playstyles in Chapter 6:

		Relationship to the Rules	Relationship to Other Participants	The Magic Circle
TOTAL FOOTBALL	Coliberation	Rules as both limiting and empowering	Other participants as roles to be swapped	All-encompassing / Blurred / Movable

*Figure 8A: Total Football as a playstyle*

Having conceptualised Total Football in similar terms to other playstyles, for the remainder of this chapter I will explore what I term ‘Total Play’, which appropriates some of the principles of Total Football in order to develop a potential mode of participation in HE. Calling this mode ‘Total Participation’ seems imprecise as Total Play moves beyond the use of play as an extended metaphor for participation, and towards a literal combination of the two (already overlapping) concepts. This more-than-metaphorical approach is central to treating play and participation as ‘total’. I will expand on this at the end of the chapter, but there is a sense that Total Play can only truly occur when participants acknowledge that they really are playing a game. The name also wears its influence on its sleeve, even to the extent that I capitalise ‘Total Play’ make the link to Total Football explicit. In the next section, I return to the data in order to find evidence that Total Play might have occurred during my year in the field.

### 8.3 The green shoots of Total Play

Looking back at the data I collected for the previous chapters, I can see the green shoots of something that might be seen as ‘Total Play’ for both students and myself, but these seem to come from different directions. For students, the idea of switching playstyles verges on

position-switching, though some key differences are evident. For me, the way in which I pulled the various magic circles together around my own participation has elements of 'totalness', but again there are limits to this. I will go into more detail on what I envision these limits to be, but in this section I focus on the aspects that demonstrated that something *like* Total Play was happening. Position-switching and totalness can occur as part of many forms of participation, but it is when they are combined with a sense that the game is being transformed (along with the context around it), that they become Total Play.

### 8.3.1 'Position switching' for students

In Chapter 6, I established the idea that the ability to switch between playstyles is in itself a form of learning, and at this level it could be argued that I have already identified a form of position-switching by students. It might be argued that the way in which students become participants in university, moving from outsiders to more central members of a community, necessarily involves switching into the role of 'student' having not been in this role before. Even once this is done my exploration of playstyles demonstrates that there are many different ways to enact this role as one becomes familiar with the rules of the game. In discussions at the end of the year, it was a common theme for students to reflect upon how much they had changed, or how much they felt more like 'a student' than they had at the start of the year. One student wrote that 'being a student you experience different things everyday', which suggests that, for them, becoming a student had not just meant taking on a new role but new ways of seeing and thinking about the world.

There is a question over timescales here, though. It is one thing to gradually shift from one role to a new one, but quite another to be able to do so deliberately, consistently and 'on demand'. Examples of students discussing this type of participation are rare, and where they do it is often idealised or theoretical rather than based on actual experiences

in education. For example, in a discussion of how HE is like a game, Lara raised how she plays games:

There's so much content online where you can watch people play, and hacks, and see the way people play and try that kind of method, maybe a different way? (Lara, Interview, 8<sup>th</sup> March 2018)

The idea of being influenced by others, and of looking at hacks or ways to change the game, is typical of a 'playing the game' playstyle, but importantly this student connects this back to trying to play the game in 'a different way'. There is a willingness to switch positions here, but not necessarily a desire to do so in reality. I will consider the limitations of this below. There is a hint here, though, that Lara sees education and games as separate activities, and that a possibility from one area might not translate into another.

Where students did switch positions, it was often between roles with which they were familiar, and where this switching was effectively sanctioned by the course. The most obvious example of this is the way in which students were encouraged to take on the role of 'teacher' in EdLab sessions. This was already a familiar role to them to some extent (after all, they had all experienced formal schooling and were enrolled on an Education course), and activities were set up to encourage them to take on this role in a 'safe' way by giving them a specific role to emulate. They were, in effect, 'playing at' being teachers whilst others in the room (including lecturers) 'played at' being learners. Beyond this, some students embraced this role more than others and continued to occupy this role outside of EdLab sessions:

The learning activity I've engaged with the most was studying in groups at the library in our free time. The fact that I constantly switched between the role of a teacher and a student by talking through things with my friends was very entertaining and insightful. (Joel, Reflective Writing, 25<sup>th</sup> April 2018)

It is notable that Joel uses the phrase 'constantly switched' here when discussing this activity. This reflection took place months before I started to consider the idea of position-



switching as an aspect of Total Football but evokes the same idea. Similarly, his analysis of the activity as 'entertaining and insightful' hints that he is using something other than grades as a way to value his experiences. Having said this he is among 'friends'; taking on the role of teacher is a relatively safe thing to do in company that is ready to accept this. My experiences of the teaching tasks in the classroom demonstrate that this position-switching could cause friction among students who were not prepared to accept others acting as educator. Again, I return to this idea below.

### 8.3.2 Totalness for the educator/researcher

The previous chapter on my autoethnographic work covered the idea that I found it easier to combine the roles of educator, researcher and player when these activities began to overlap to the extent that they were indistinguishable from each other. I argued that it was my active combining of the contexts in which I was working that created this, in particular when I capitalised on opportunities to enact multiple roles at once. This seems like an embryonic version of totalness because it implies a breakdown in the boundaries between activities that enables new forms of participation.

As I reflected earlier, I felt more able to combine contexts as the year went on partly because I felt like more of a member of a community. As with Total Football, my own ability to position-switch depended somewhat upon colleagues being able to move into the roles I was no longer occupying. Thus, when I took the lead on the games-design project and acted as more of a 'playmaker', colleagues moved to cover some of the logistical and pastoral support that I would otherwise manage with my own group. Teaching this project became a team game:

I'm also struck by the way that [other lecturers] have let me (pushed me to?) take the lead on this activity – like I'm suddenly the expert on this. And I hear sentences coming out of my mouth that sound like a games designer/scholar. (Research Journal, 28<sup>th</sup> February 2018)

Here I reflect on being 'pushed' to take the lead; it is not just a question of my team-mates allowing me to become a playmaker, but rather actively making it happen and helping me to blur the boundary between my research and practice. At the same time, even here I am returning to the idealised idea of a designer, but this feels more like a role I am 'playing at' than actually enacting. Again, this feels like more of a creation of the context than my own action. Here I do not acknowledge, though, that I have actively created this specific context by pushing for a project focused on games-design. Indeed, the empowering part of this from my perspective was that totalness offered me something of a safety net to take risks like pushing for new activities. This approach to teaching and research is chaotic, and somewhat uncontrollable, but it was clear from my earlier attempts to separate teaching and research that the context in which I was working required embracing chaos to some extent.

By combining contexts with the support of others, I was better able to experiment with my approaches and discover new ways of doing things. For example, a diced-based teaching activity introduced at the start of the year, which I had dismissed in one role as 'not playful enough', became an important research playful research activity when I returned to it later in light of reflection. This was not just me changing roles, but also bringing ideas and attitudes from one role across into others.

My reflective writing seems to become more honest as the year goes on, which can also be read as evidence of totalness because it implies a shift from idealism to realism. At one point I write:

It is very difficult to write reflectively about the activities that I have developed this year without the piece turning into a validation of specific play-based activities, and, ultimately, I still see the value in playful approaches. However, these sorts of writing about education are themselves symptomatic of a results-driven, instrumentalised approach that neoliberalism engenders. Authors and readers are interested in them in as much as their successes are replicable in other contexts, and the project I have

undertaken seems so tied up with context that anything beyond ‘think about taking a playful approach’ seems like it would be unsuccessful advice. (Reflective Writing Extract, July 2018)

Here, my honest frustration over instrumentalism and how it links to what I have actually done is a clear indication that I am moving away from narrow neoliberal ideas of success. I am aware of the limitations of my approach, at least from others’ perspectives. Elsewhere, though, I am positive about the activities I have designed and delivered. This seems to demonstrate a move away from any one notion of success and towards the idea that ‘success’ might be whatever I want it to be in a given context. An awareness of my limitations seems almost empowering as I use it to justify shifting away from an unrealistic or unsustainable idea of success. The playful metaphors that I raised at the end of the previous chapter exemplify this to some extent. All of them depend upon this blurring of boundaries between roles, with my never being *solely* educator, researcher or player. Compared to the idealised notion of educator/researcher as designer, which has fairly clear success criteria, the other metaphors offer different notions of success. If I am not playing a competitive game, then my notions of success need to shift, perhaps towards the ideas of playing beautifully, or skilfully, or memorably. If I am not even playing, but watching others play or enabling their own position-switching, then the scope for new forms of success is even broader.

### 8.3.3 Total Play in retrospect

It is worth reiterating that all of this evidence only points to Total Play in retrospect. At no point did I go out of my way to create Total Play, or look for it specifically in students’ attitudes and behaviours, because I encountered it too late in the year. This comes across in the fact that my evidence for embryonic Total Play comes from two different angles; via position-switching for students and via blurred magic circles for myself. True Total Play, if it were to exist, would involve both of these activities for both groups. In a way, all of our

participation depended on our prior roles and experiences. This makes some sense from a metaphorical point of view as well. Whilst outfield players switched positions under Total Football, they would not swap roles with the goalkeeper, or a member of the opposite team, or the referee. In this way, among others, Total Play was limited.

#### **8.4 The limits of Total Play**

It would be overstating things to say that a genuine instance of Total Play emerged during my year in the field, and there are a number of reasons why this is the case. I hope that by identifying and analysing these limitations, I can not only seek ways in which Total Play might be encouraged in the future, but also go further in my exploration of Total Play as a concept; can its absence contribute to our understanding as well as its presence? As with 'not playing' it can be difficult to study the absence of something, but I reiterate that this section stems from a wider discussion. In revisiting data, I speculatively start to link my experiences with those of my students. Whilst our ways into a prototypical Total Play were different, I find that the obstacles to achieving it fully were related.

I have already addressed that Total Play might have been limited because I uncovered it too late. Timings came in elsewhere too. I saw even my most involved students for just a couple of hours per week, so was unlikely to transform their entire approach to university and life in general. Even my attempts to extend play outside of the university with playful journal tasks faltered, though. At the end of year, though some students had engaged with these tasks many had not. One student reflected that they 'didn't have/make the time' to engage in the playful journal tasks, and another that they didn't use the journal because they weren't sure what to write about 'and [they] really don't like writing'. In this way, play (and Total Play) was limited by the same obstacles that face any other activity in education.

Beyond this, it seems that Total Play did not develop in a meaningful way because it was hamstrung by other factors. The two most notable factors were social relations within the community, and the institution. In terms of the magic circle, these can be reducible to the other players and the rules of the game, and to some extent they coalesce around my role because I had influence over both of these. In both cases, whilst the data does not directly address Total Play it is possible to see these themes emerge in ways that limit its development.

The obstacles stemming from social relations emerge largely in the way that students talk about the participation of others. In Chapter 6 I referred to difficulties in group work as part of my discussion of playstyles, arguing that even 'non-participation' of others affected students in the room by forcing them to adapt their playstyles. I want to return to this idea in light of Total Play and consider the ways in which students' ability to shift playstyles was limited by others. Take, for example this exchange from an interview with two students:

Me: But it's clear that there are groups within the year. You can tell who's friends with each other and that kind of thing.

E: Yeah. Kind of... recently it's been an issue with groups, when you have to get into groups it has become an issue.

Me: What, because you always work with the same people, or...

E: Yeah. People are getting used to working with the same people.

Me: Yeah. Because we tried to mix things up a little bit yesterday, how did that go?

N: It was alright. The lesson the day before was with [tutor], and we had to get into groups for our ECD assignment, and that just unravelled so many, like, people kicking off... We wasn't obviously, because we were in our usual cliquey thing. But when you were saying about getting into different groups yesterday I was, like 'Oh god, I can't be bothered', not because I didn't want to be in another group, but because I've seen how petty and fickle everyone else is when picking groups and I don't have time for that.

E: It's because certain people, like, you know they're not reliable to turn up. And when you've got group work you need... [trails off]

(Ellie and Nate, Interview, 7<sup>th</sup> February 2018)

Here, I raise the idea of friendship groups, but the timing of the interview after a particularly eventful session means that discussion immediately shifts to problems in working with others. As a group, lecturers had decided to attempt to playfully regroup students so that they would work with new people. We did this by rolling dice to assign students to new groups. This immediately caused issues as students worried about working with others, often using the same sort of reasoning as Nate does above. The participation of others was seen as a threat to individuals' participation; they needed to work with those that they trusted. As Ellie puts it, they were 'used to' working in their established groups.

I read this as an act of resistance against an imposition of 'position-switching' from a group of educators trying to behave playfully. Nate acknowledges that it is 'cliquey' to participate in this way, but it also seems like a genuine response to the risk of change. What really brings this home is that my own observations of the group would have placed Ellie in the category of these classic 'non-participants'. She was rarely in sessions at the start of the year, and earlier in this interview had acknowledged that she had not been in the session leading to this one. However, Nate feels more comfortable with her in his group than other, unknown people. Her non-participation is predictable, at least, and does not come with increased risk.

Earlier in the year I reflected in my field notes on the way in which playful activities might need to hit a critical mass in order to really take off:

I'm amazed by the difference that having a full class can make. Even though this is a fairly 'chalk and talk' session there's a buzz in the room that's driving me as a lecturer... (Reflective Journal, 11<sup>th</sup> January 2018)

Looking back, I can see the same applies to Total Play. Even if I had imposed it, it would have required the collective effort of a huge proportion of students, and an effort on my part, to take root. This seems incredibly unlikely given the way in which students reacted to efforts to change their practice from a position of authority. Position-switching requires trust that others will position-switch with you, and whilst this might happen within friendship groups there was a distinct lack of trust that others could be relied upon.

This was exacerbated by institutional factors, or at least participants' perception of institutional demands as the 'rules of the game'. In Chapter 6 I argued that 'playing to win' was a perfectly valid playstyle given the discourse of success that surrounds HE, but it may be inconsistent with Total Play simply because Total Play requires individuals to think differently about success, and a dominant focus on 'playing to win' can get in the way of this. Having said this, this inconsistency is not fundamental because the process of thinking differently might lead to an individual choosing the established notion of success suggested by 'playing to win'. What matters is the process of getting there, and the idea that ones' notion of success might be challenged by others. Even this process, though, is made more difficult when students come up against the rules.

The most common way to recognise this attitude towards rules and trust came in my discussions of chaos with students, which were originally prompted by a discussion of the way in which *Dungeons and Dragons* characters are generally described on a scale from 'lawful' or 'chaotic'. I frequently asked students how chaotic they thought they were *as students*, or how chaotic they felt they had to be, and their responses often framed chaos in opposition to institutional rules:

I think that's... Yeah, so allow the chaos but, like I say, have that underlying respect or be aware that there is a need for the law there. So the deadlines are there, as long as you get to the end I don't think the approach is too... You shouldn't be too focused on either one, really. (Nate, Interview, 22<sup>nd</sup> March 2018)

In Chapter 6 I framed some of these discussions of chaos as part of ‘playing the game’ and ‘counterplay’, but they can also contribute to understanding of the limits of Total Play because they indicate student attitudes towards the institution as a source of rules. In almost every case, students admitted that they would like to be chaotic, but then immediately did what Nate does above, and reverse back to an ‘underlying respect’ for the rules ‘as long as you’ get to the outcome you are meant to achieve. Even creative responses feel constrained by both written and unwritten rules.

My own position was complicated by this, and this in turn limited my own ability to play totally. Students clearly had a level of trust in me as a lecturer that meant that I could encourage them to play. For example, Sadie’s reflection of playful tasks at the start of the section on ‘playing for fun’ in Chapter 6 is about doing things because I had told students to. In the same conversation, we discussed the power that educators have in compelling students to participate, and how this in itself is limited by further rules:

S: ...In any class that I had I’d be like “Why am I doing this?” – “Because I told you to!”

Me: That’s the biggest question in education – “Why are we doing this?”. It’s the worst question a teacher can get because often the answer is “Because I’ve told you to”, and then you think “We need to do something about that”...

S: “Why are you asking me? Because I’ve been told to!”

(Sadie, Interview, 17<sup>th</sup> April 2018)

Here, our reflections indicate that we know that even chaotic educators have rules to follow. As much as I played the role an agent of chaos in an otherwise conventional course, the idea of ‘playing to win’ came back in for me as I concerned myself with how I needed to participate to be seen as a ‘real’ educator. This is at the heart of my worries in Chapter 7. When we think about the chaos that is inherent in Total Play, we have to think about how the chaos is ‘allowed’ to happen, and how the extent of this chaos is defined (for



example, in Total Football's case, that it takes place within the conventional rules of football).

I do not want to overreach here and say that institutional rules are deliberately put in place to prevent the chaos in Total Play. It is participants' interpretation of perceived rules as preventing chaos that does this, along with the unintended consequences of

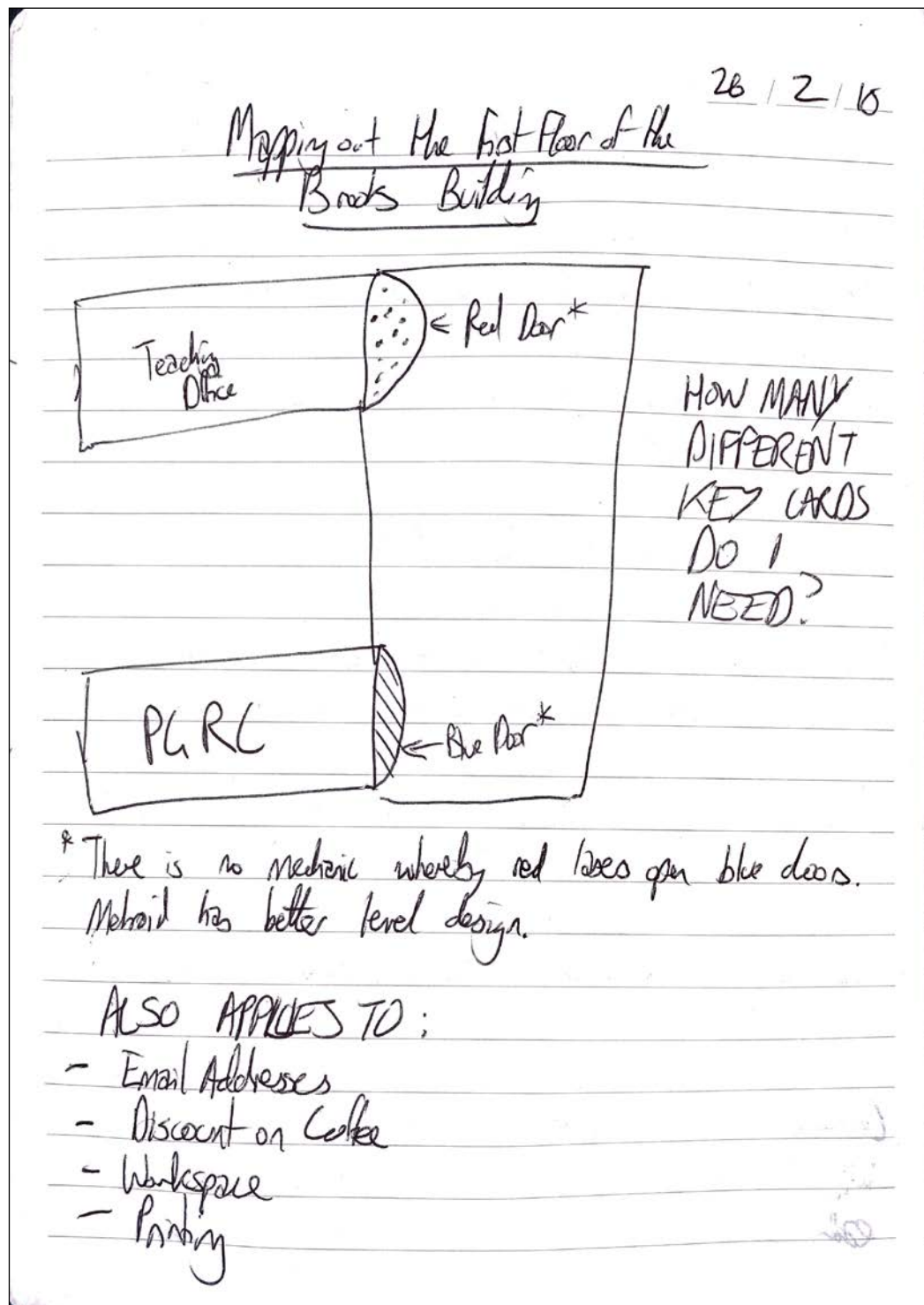


Figure 8B: Research Journal 28<sup>th</sup> February 2018 – My office as a Super Metroid level

seemingly unrelated rules. Take, for example, Figure 8B, an image from my research journal, which I drew in frustration with the doors in my building which were designated for staff or postgraduate students but not both, meaning that I would often lock myself out of one office by only having the swipe-card for other in my pocket. My comment that 'Metroid has better level design' summarises my feelings; I have been attempting to merge the roles of researcher and educator (i.e. student and staff) but am physically prevented from doing so by the idiosyncratic way in which the locked doors work in this section of the building. The game is stopping me from playing it by refusing to be a game; I am limited not by rules deliberately established by the institution but by a poorly designed, bug-ridden system.

What these limitations have in common is that they interfere with Total Play's key task of redefining success. In the case of social interactions, students were at cross-purposes when it came to how they defined success, or could not trust others to work towards what they considered to be success, and I felt a responsibility to consider students' ideas of success as well as my own. In the case of the institution, and beyond the fact that it had clear success criteria, both students and I were constrained by the rules as we perceived them, even when these seemed to be internally produced. Even when we experimented with chaos, we still had a strict notion of success, perhaps tied to the idea of 'playing to win'. Both limitations operated by reinforcing conventional notions of success.

The trouble with Total Play is, no matter how hard they try, no one individual can achieve it. It is a collective activity, but without the impetus to work towards a collective goal, students and educators will do their own thing. However, Total Play also has potential in that it could provide this collective goal.

## 8.5 The value of Total Play

If the development of Total Play depends so heavily upon all of these factors, and faces so many obstacles, then it might be argued that it is near impossible to achieve. However, examining it even in terms of its limitations has strengthened my feeling that it is worth pursuing, and I want to close this chapter by returning to some of the more optimistic ideas that came out of conceptualising Total Play. Whilst it was limited, there were particular aspects of its potential within the foundation year programme that hint at how to pursue it in the future. This is the point at which I start to move beyond data and back to theorising, but in doing so I am able to place Total Play among other works from widening participation literature that I reviewed in Chapter 2.

One of the strongest themes that emerges from the data is that the prototypical Total Play that I encountered had the most potential when students themselves had power over the process of engaging in it, effectively ‘changing the game’ as De Koven might put it. I have reflected that my own efforts to introduce playfulness, whilst necessary given the nature of the course I was teaching, did sometimes feel like an imposition, and although some students did respond to this I felt that students only really got a chance to control the process in the second half of the year when let go of the reins somewhat. The strongest evidence for Total Play is when the student themselves critically engage in the process of play that in turn affects others. For example, one conversation between students captured the idea their own sense of play affecting others:

Tifa: ...I think you should have autonomy as a learner. Then because it's more, almost, on you, you're more likely to be playful with it rather than have these strict set guidelines or rules that you have to follow. So say if the lecturer just introduced the topic, and then let's look at the different approaches you could use to cover this topic, then we could address it more playfully.

Joel: Yeah but then you run the risk of having a lazy learner who will just think ‘okay I don't need to do anything’...

Tifa: But you're gonna have that anyway!

Joel: Yeah I guess.

Tifa: You're going to have people who just switch off in your lesson anyway so you're going to have to use your playful approaches to engage them! [Laughs]

(Tifa and Joel, Interview, 8<sup>th</sup> March 2018)

Here Tifa makes an argument for playful engagement that is reminiscent of the 'playing for fun' and 'playing the game' playstyles in its embrace of being playful within the rules of the game. She also develops a 'playing the game'-type attitude to other students, arguing that they are going to be 'lazy' no matter what happens, and sees this as something of a responsibility, claiming it is 'on you' to be playful. This seems like a step up from previous examples of playstyles because she engages in critical reflection of how others might affect her participation and chooses to try an alternative in spite of this, with the implication being that she might persuade others to join her in this. In making this argument, Tifa even exemplifies how it might actually happen. Joel's 'Yeah I guess' seems like an admission of defeat in the face of Tifa's playful appropriation. My observations of their interactions in sessions over the course of the year make me comfortable characterising this as fairly typical of the way in which they influenced each other. Playmakers exist in the student body too.

While we are considering this role, this exchange is also important because Tifa (perhaps without realising) demonstrates mental position-switching. She begins talking about having 'autonomy as a learner' at the start, but by the end is thinking about 'your lessons' and 'your playful approaches'. She is thinking as an educator, but the you in 'your' is ambiguous as she could be thinking of engaging fellow students in activities. In this way, 'playful approaches' might be seen as more than a teaching strategy and more of a strategy for participation more generally.

The foundation year programme seems like an effective incubator for students who wanted to participate in this ‘game-changing’ way for a number of reasons. For a start, students of education are perhaps more likely to ‘play for fun’ as they play the part of educators, and any attempt step into the shoes of their tutors is a move towards position-switching. Beyond this, as Chapter 5 discusses, the foundation year attracts a cohort that is demographically diverse, especially in terms of age. This made these sorts of interactions more likely as mature students could perhaps be seen as further away from the instrumentalist strictures of the formal education system. Importantly, both Tifa and Arthur had spent time out of education, and had reflected on this prior to the exchange above.

Related to this is the way in which the foundation year’s teaching focuses on reflective practice and bringing one’s own experiences to bear on discussion. This meant that students engaged in a sort of slow-motion reflexivity around the ways in which learning is tied up with identity, which again encouraged them to think more critically about participation. This really came to the fore in the closing discussions at the end of the year, which had a bittersweet, elegiac feel to them as students acknowledged that things would not be the same once they were enrolled on full degree courses:

I don’t know, like, foundation year has been relatively easy (I’m sure you’ll all agree), but like, as the years progress it gets harder, and the amount of work is different, and the strain, and being able to balance will become harder because I don’t know if I’ll be doing these activities that I’m doing now when I get to my third year. I might not have time for it so I definitely want to try my best to do as many as I can now, you know? (Lara, Interview, 8<sup>th</sup> March 2018)

The foundation year felt more free than other courses at the university, but to a certain extent, the foundation year acted as a microcosm of the university’s position within the education system. As I mentioned at the start of my argument, universities have a large

scope for experimentation within the confines of regulation, especially in terms of teaching and learning. University educators have a huge amount of control over the content and delivery of individual courses given the strictures put in place at a national and institutional level, which makes the university an easily adapted space. The foundation programme I worked on is a particularly novel response to the 'rules of the game', but other responses have space to be just as creative and provide students with this sense of freedom in a safe way.

If Total Play is going to happen, then these spaces are the sort of environments where it might. Staff and students came from demographically diverse groups but were also encouraged to view activities in terms of what we had in common as well as what made our roles different. This was the beginning of the sort of supportive environment where position-switching and totalness could occur. This connects Total Play back to the agenda of widening participation by providing a different goal to aim for. Rather than thinking in terms of student inputs and outputs, Total Play aims for widened participation because it values diverse student bodies who are better able to change the game by playing it, and this is a goal that can be shared by both educators and their students. This was strengthened by the foundation year being a space for newcomers. Both my students and I were recent additions to the university who were perhaps more comfortable critiquing its rules and structures through participation, and we all had an incentive to do so because it tied so strongly into what we were each studying.

Whilst other approaches might see widening participation as a process with a defined end (presumably when participation has been 'widened'), this critique of rules and structures is not something that can be switched off once it started, and might lead to further and continuing transformation. Total Play has the potential to 'totalise' contexts by blurring boundaries, and its possible contribution might be to facilitate further transformatory practice for both students and educators. This envisioned practice is far

nearer Burke's (2012) 'transforming participation' rather than widening participation *per se*, because it helps us to imagine how the university might change in response to new participants, especially if they are empowered to be rule-makers rather than rule-takers.

Total Play's view of the rules of the game is critical, but differs from other critical forms. Developing a critical understanding of the rules normally involves understanding how they might be different, and this is often framed in terms of how the rules limit players in a 'negative' way (i.e. by preventing them from doing what they want to do). Pushing against these rules is a form of critical engagement, and empowers participants under other playstyles. Total Play, however, provides a more positive way to engage critically with the rules in that it encourages participants to consider the ways in which they are empowered by those rules as well. This helps the process of transforming participation because it helps newcomers like 'WP students' move away from participating in the way that they are expected to participate even as they benefit from the imposition of rules. As with Total Football, the rules are simultaneously limiting and empowering.

Once again, this returns us to a central theme of the thesis, that play has once again provided a new way of thinking about education. However, in the case of Total Play this transformation of thought is even more important than before, because Total Play is a pedagogical strategy that requires thinking differently as well as acting differently. The true potential in Total Play is that these new ways of thinking transform the university space by involving new people, which will start the ball rolling on a much wider transformatory process.

## **8.6 Conclusion: 'No better medal'**

There is no better medal than being acclaimed for your style. For the good of football, we need a team of invention, attacking ideas and style to emerge. Even if

it doesn't win it will inspire footballers of all ages everywhere. That is the greatest reward. (Johan Cruyff, 1998 quoted in Jensen, 2014: 721)

Cruyff's words here are inspiring, but in my experience, there is no better way to infuriate other players in a competitive game than to claim you don't even want win anymore. When I admit to my partner that I haven't been trying to win *Monopoly* (Magie and Darrow, 1935) for the past hour, but rather trying to get one card of each colour, or all the properties with 'Street' in their name, she is frustrated because it undermines her skill at the game, and she accuses me of being a sore-loser.

The research question that sparked this chapter was what, if anything, play could contribute to a transformed philosophy of education, and Total Play is my personal answer to this question because it provides a motivation and a means to redefine success in education. It moves beyond play as an educational technique, and even beyond play as a way of researching and thinking about education, towards play as a way of experiencing education and the world. Of course, this needs to be seen as just *one* way to experience education, but I also argue that Total Play's particular focus on position-switching and totalness makes it an apt starting point for developing new critical and participatory pedagogical practice. Even those institutions that are effective at widening participation still need to consider transforming it to empower more of their students to participate in more meaningful ways.

Total Play is a mode of participation in that involves participants looking for and taking opportunities to play multiple roles within their context. It requires participants to understand the rules of the game enough that they can use them to their advantage, or change them in collaboration with others when necessary. Unlike other ways of participating, the lines between different roles are blurred, to the extent that students might take on roles normally taken by educators, and vice versa. This implies that there is a level of collaboration in Total Play; position-switching cannot be undertaken alone, but



needs to take place in an environment where other players will react to one player switching. This system allows for individual moments of inspiration, creativity and brilliance, but importantly these are not read by other players as threatening or unachievable, but instead used as inspiration for further acts of creativity.

These ambitious aims mean that Total Play is also, as it stands, unachievable. It requires such a leap on the part of students, educationalists and institutions that it might be too utopian to happen. However, even incremental steps might be an improvement, and Total Play provides an impetus to make some of these steps in the first place, to, as Cruyff puts it above, inspire others even if it does not win. I am particularly drawn to the idea that Total Play might contribute to a process of transforming participation by encouraging new students to reinterpret and recreate the 'rules of the game' and aim for new ways of succeeding, even if these seem at odds with current rules and success criteria. Total Play raises the question of how we can give students (and educators) the chance to lose the 1974 World Cup final in a really beautiful way.

Total Play's 'emancipation from expectation' reframes all of the interactions that students, educators and researchers have with education and with each other, and therefore transforms participation. This is the heart of the theoretical contribution that Total Play can make to studies of participation. Like other critical approaches, it acknowledges that HE (or any other context for participation) is a game, but importantly it is not 'just a game'. Games, as socially constructed systems of rules, are a part of the real world just as much as they are separated from it, and when we describe something as a game then we do not have to do so in a metaphorical way. This is pragmatism in action; our reality depends upon communication and participation, and through communicating and participating we change reality. Calling something a game makes it one, and as soon as we acknowledge that this game is real (rather than 'just' metaphorical) it actually can be changed through participation.

## 9 – Conclusion: Game over?

A play-community generally tends to become permanent even after the game is over. (Huizinga 1949: 12)

### 9.1 Introduction: ‘You Died’



*Figure 9A: The ‘You Died’ Screen from Dark Souls*

Huizinga’s magic circle’s treatment of play as a temporally bounded phenomenon implies that, at some point, the game is over. However, early in his discussion Huizinga acknowledges that things are not as clear-cut as this:

‘Play begins, and then at a certain moment it is “over”. It plays itself to an end. While it is in progress all is movement, change, alternation, succession, association, separation. But immediately connected with its limitation as to time there is a further curious feature of play: it at once assumes fixed form as a cultural phenomenon. Once played, it endures as a new-found creation of the mind, a treasure to be retained by the memory. It is transmitted, it becomes tradition. It can be repeated at any time, whether it be “child’s play” or a game of chess, or at fixed intervals like a mystery. In this faculty of repetition lies one of the most essential qualities of play’ (Huizinga, 1949: 9-10)

Play is, by definition, limited, to the extent that it ‘plays itself to an end’, suggesting that players are not in complete control of this happening. Within these limits, though, lie the seeds of its next iteration. This comes across in examples beyond those offered by Huizinga, of repeated games, or even games that are treasured as memories and which might build the sort of communities he mentions in the quote at the start of this chapter.

Games can end for a variety of reasons. A game of football might end because ninety minutes (plus injury time) have passed and the referee has blown the whistle, but might also end because the pitch is flooded, or because one of the players’ parents has called them in for their tea. Similarly, games can continue long beyond they were due to finish if players get into something like a ‘flow’-state and lose track of time, or agree amongst themselves to keep playing for a bit longer. Games can be paused, or restarted, or abandoned, or transformed so much that they are not the game that players started playing. The magic circle leaks, so that even if we have technically stopped the game, we might not stop thinking about the next time we will get to play.

All of this suggests that games complicate the notion of endings. Take, for instance, the screenshot from *Dark Souls* (FromSoftware, 2011) above. One would assume that death is fairly definitive, but even by the standards of videogames with extra lives and save-games *Dark Souls* is different. The game essentially wipes your progress after a death, sending you back to the start of the area with none of the ‘souls’ (i.e. points) you have gathered from defeated enemies. The only way to recover fully is to return to the spot where you died and reclaim your souls, but your resurrection also means the resurrection of every enemy you fought before, so you must defeat all of them again. The core gameplay loop is one of recovering from death and making frustratingly slow, incremental progress to get a tiny bit further than the last time you restarted. ‘You Died’ is not just an indication that your current game is over, but also a suggestion that you should probably carry on.

This has echoes of early arcade games, which would encourage you to push another coin into the machine to continue your game. As long as your money, time and patience did not run out, you could keep playing.

I am really only finishing this thesis because I have to. This is a time-bound project that depends upon limited funding (and patience!) and which needs an end-point. Like a game, though, taking stock of this ending suggests many new beginnings. What should I do next, given what I have discussed, and how am I going to play the game differently next time? In this closing chapter I take stock of my arguments before indicating some potential next steps for research and practice.

## **9.2 Returning to the research questions: My contribution and its limits**

At the start of the thesis I broke the wider question of how play and participation are linked in HE into three sub-questions that focused on students, teaching/research and the philosophy of HE respectively. Each of these sub-questions was then, ostensibly, answered by a chapter of analysis, but I have been clear throughout this thesis that every part of my research into this topic has been constructed in conversation with other parts. Here I spend some time drawing my arguments around each research question together, not just by giving a summary of the three analysis chapters but by reminding the reader of pertinent ideas from elsewhere in the thesis.

### **9.2.1 RQ1: How does play help us to understand student participation?**

This question had its roots in the idea that students' experiences of participation might be different from those envisioned by policy and educational design, and that by addressing this idea we might better understand these experiences. These roots hint at the eventual approach I took to answering the question too; students' experiences are also different *from each other*, and this is what play can help us to understand.

Through analysis of my data collected from (and with) students, I established the idea of 'playstyles' as a way of capturing the nuances of their participation in the foundation year. This was not an attempt to categorise student behaviours and attitudes, but rather to acknowledge that different ways of playing the game of HE will develop in response to teaching as part of the social process of learning, and as students negotiate their own participation.

By examining students' participation in their education in terms of their relationship to 'rules of the game' and others in their learning community (and beyond), I captured some of the less formal ways in which students come to experience HE even in formal contexts. Some of these understandings might seem so recognisable to experienced educators as to be not worth discussing. The idea that students might be obsessed with maximising their mark with the minimum of effort has certainly been commonplace throughout my career. Yet I wanted to take these modes of participation seriously, especially when it came to 'non-participation' which, as I discussed, can be understood in many different ways, and which can include learning in its own right.

This conception of playstyles is indebted to the model of the magic circle of participation, which is in turn indebted to the model of legitimate peripheral participation. Thinking with this in mind unlocked the idea that developing the ability to shift playstyles might itself be a form of learning because doing so requires students to understand so much about the rules that apply in their context and themselves. However, this would suggest that educators need to provide opportunities for this shift to take place, especially in light of the idea of Total Play. In this way, the answer to this question contributes to answers to the other two.

Prior to engaging in this part of my research, literature suggested that the answer to this research question is that play provides new ways of participating in education which are more engaging, motivating or exploratory for students, which we in turn come to

understand through research. Nothing I have found disputes this, but my answer adds to this in two ways. Firstly, I argue that play also helps us to understand student participation because, by framing participation in terms of playstyles we can better grasp the different ways in which students participate in informal ways, and how these link to their participation in other activities. Secondly, this applies even to innovative pedagogical activities, which, like any other approach, will be appropriated, subverted and transformed in different ways by students as they negotiate their participation with them.

Indeed, this may be a contribution that places this study more firmly within the literature on situated learning and legitimate peripheral participation. Although this was never originally presented as a model for formal learning, it has been used in this way. Thinking about playstyles helps the model return to its roots by reinforcing that many of the processes that take place as students move towards more central participation in learning are, like the model says, 'magical' in their unpredictability.

#### 9.2.2 RQ2: How does a playful approach transform teaching and research in higher education?

Again, literature seemed to provide an answer to at least half of this question already; I identified a number of ways in which play had linked to transformed educational practice, from developing games to embracing safe-spaces for failure, and my methodology chapter also revealed that play has been seen as a potential solution to over-hygienic social-science research methods. However, I wanted to go deeper in my answer to this question by examining teaching and research as parts of the same situated process, and by considering how play might change this in context.

Building upon the idea of playstyles I began to consider the ways in which I negotiated my own participation in teaching, research and play. Using autoethnography afforded me the opportunity to go more in-depth with some of my thinking on what it is to

participate in many 'magic circles' at once by reflecting critically upon my experiences of a year in the field. When understood in terms of the model of the magic circle of participation, I saw that my participation in teaching and research moved from a sense of idealism, where I was not affected by the rules of the game because I was not even playing it yet, through realism, where my following the rules of each activity seemed to interfere with my participation in the other, to opportunism, as I became comfortable enough in this context to create opportunities for my research and teaching to play with each other. It was not just participation in multiple magic circles that had power in enabling my participation here, as I was doing this all along, but my developing ability to actively draw those magic circles together around my own practice.

Understanding the trajectory of my participation in this way allowed me to be more critical because it reinforced the idea that there are many ways to conceptualise one's own participation. At the start of my journey, I seemed to define myself as a designer because I was working at the intersection of education, research and play. However, cultural ideas borrowed from play suggested other, more useful metaphors for the way in which I actively pulled the magic circles of research and teaching together. Each of these offers new ways of thinking about teaching and research in a playful and play-informed way.

My answer to this question, then, is that play transforms teaching and research both in practice and in theory. In practice, play often provided the bridge between the two activities, and gave me the legitimacy to draw them together around my own practice. In theory, it provided new ways of thinking about my own practice in participatory terms, which unlocked new critical understandings. Of course, these theoretical considerations are very much *my* theoretical considerations, grounded in my experiences, but I hope that, at the very least, this answer demonstrates a particular, playful methodology that practitioners can use to understand their own practice on their own terms. This, in effect,

relates this question back to hooks (1994) and other practitioners of critical pedagogy, and perhaps forces a conversation between this approach and design-based research.

### 9.2.3 RQ3: How might the idea of play transform our philosophical approach to education?

I suggested in the introduction that answering this question would involve me explicitly crossing the 'is/ought' gap. In reality, I have done this throughout the thesis, but this question remains the one that most directly addresses the overlap between the epistemological and the ethical that is implied by my embrace of pragmatism. Similarly, throughout the thesis I have argued that changing the way we use concepts is in itself a transformatory act in HE, but Chapter 8 is perhaps the apotheosis of this view.

I developed Total Play as an answer to this question, but the process of getting to this also demonstrated the contribution that play can make to transforming a philosophical approach. My 'discovery' of Total Football as a model was dependent upon developing a willingness to allow mess and chaos into the research process, and to blur the boundaries between education and the 'real world'. In this way, I developed Total Play as a potential mode of participation *by* playing totally in my specific context. It was another matter, though, to consider how others might do so. For my year in the field, Total Play remained largely theoretical, although I would argue that, where it did exist, this was where participants moved beyond a metaphorical understanding of HE as a game, and began to question what constitutes success.

Chapter 8 is also effectively a case study of what happens when philosophical approaches hit reality, in that I found limited evidence that Total Play actually occurred consistently during my year in the field. I outlined the reasons for this, which I framed in terms of the magic circle; other players and the rules of the game. Even this, though, contributes to an answer to the question because it highlights that pragmatist philosophical



approaches to education are inevitably tied up in the reality of practice, and cannot afford to be overly idealistic.

The answer to the question of how play transforms our philosophical approach to education is not that it inevitably leads to Total Play. However, I hope the story of my work with this concept indicates that, through using play within a philosophical approach, we can transform how we think. Others might have come up with different responses to the question which might have transformed their educational philosophies in different ways. The vital aspect is that it was play that unlocked this. Through providing a different mode of experience, it enabled me to conceptualise education in a different way.

Having provided caveats, the reason I find Total Play to be so potentially transformatory is that it is not just an example of what a transformation might be, but also goes some way to demonstrating the means to achieve that transformation in practice. This idea goes all the way back to my earliest frustrations with the neoliberal system of HE that I first discussed in the literature review. Throughout the thesis I have looked for alternatives to this, and Total Play seems a good way of embracing many of these alternatives as challenges to expected ways of doing things in education. This might not even be a matter of policy. Total Play's transformed philosophy of education seems much more focused on the small-scale changes that individuals can make in their contexts at a local level, and how these contribute to wider change.

#### 9.2.4 Back to the overarching question

Drawing these questions together, what do they have in common, and how can we address the overarching question of how play and participation are connected in HE? The most obvious answer to this seems to be 'they interact to produce new ways of thinking about and doing education'. I have argued that play offers not just distinct educational methods but new ways of understanding and organising education from the perspective of all

participants. In the case of university participation, this means not just widening out to new groups but transforming in response so that everyone is able to participate in more democratic, more playful ways.

This largely backs up many of the more critical arguments I encountered in the literature. Where the argument of the thesis goes beyond, this, though, is in the approach it has taken to the question. In asking how play and participation *are* connected, I have strayed into questions of how they *might be* connected, which inspired the utopian thread of Total Play. This emerged in response to the thread of neoliberalism that I encountered in the literature review, but also as a legacy of many of the play scholars I am influenced by. Throughout, though, I have tried to keep my utopianism pragmatic; I have kept in the front of my mind the thoughts of McKenna (2001), who distinguishes between ‘end-state’ and ‘process’ utopias, and who argues that, if pragmatism is a utopian philosophy, then it is one focused on utopia as a process that must be participated in rather than designed. My response to the question of how play and participation are connected that says they *should* be connected through Total Play needs to be read in this light. I am aware of the limitations of this, and I am trying to create an image of how even individual practice might be seen as a small-scale act of utopia-building.

At points, I also moved the emphasis of the question away from the ‘are’ and to the ‘how’ by critically examining the actual processes at work as students and I became participants in university. This connected the ‘how’ to context, demonstrating that often participation depends upon informal and creative interpretations of the rules of the game in a given context. The study became about the participants and their power rather than the generalised concept of participation. Another answer to the question of how play and participation are connected in HE might be that they are both undertaken by people, and that we can understand the activities by looking at those who are taking part. This is an

active, methodological answer, and suggests future research into related areas which I will return to below.

In developing these answers, I have made an original contribution to the field of education research in a number of ways. My use of ideas from play and games scholarship (the magic circle, playstyles etc.) to describe informal participation within a formal setting is fairly novel, and creates new links between previously unrelated fields. More importantly, I have developed a prototype philosophy of education which moves beyond considering the potential uses of play and towards an understanding of how play can inform every activity in which we participate. In doing so, I reclaim a thread of Dewey's (1938) pragmatism, which has been underappreciated. Play, like communication and democracy, is epistemologically linked to a much wider set of concepts than we might first consider.

Dewey would argue that these sorts of theoretical insights are also practical innovations because of the epistemological link between theory and practice, but I am aware that this may not satisfy educationalists who are looking for directly applicable lessons. On an 'everyday' practical level, my contributions are a little more difficult to ascertain. I certainly tried new ways of teaching and researching in the setting of HE, and my year in the field offers some insights into what it is to put playful ideas into practice in a new setting. However, given that my chapter on Total Play acknowledges how limited these were I am uncomfortable making recommendations off the back of this. This is exacerbated by my attitude towards the whole notion of 'solutions' in education. I am reluctant to offer my whole argument as a solution, even a hypothetical one. Instead, I hope it acts as more of a spark for further action than a model of best practice.

#### 9.2.5 The limits of my answer

Some of the limitations of this argument have been pre-empted by my previous chapter. Many of these stem from the limited context in which I was working. I worked with around eighty students on one course that is markedly different from other HE contexts. I cannot make any sweeping statements about participation in HE in general off the back of work with what might be considered an unrepresentative sample of students. Having said this, my constant awareness of the peculiarities of the foundation year has been a useful guide to examining students' participation in more depth. There is something to be said for treating any group of students participating in research in the same way in order to understand the particular informal rules that apply within their magic circle but not elsewhere. This is especially the case given that universities are essentially aiming to make their student bodies more like the foundation year by effectively widening participation. This cohort might be seen as model of a potential future university.

Even for the purpose of understanding these students, though, the thesis is limited because it is so time-bound, and tied to my own teaching practice. Anecdotal evidence from colleagues suggests that whilst foundation year students tend to enter into the first year of their full degree courses more enthusiastically than students who have not taken a foundation degree, there is some regression to the mean as they become more like 'traditional' students. The same might be said of students who move on from a playful practitioner to engage in more conventional learning, and this is part of what influenced me to consider Total Play as requiring students to embed play in their own participation. A different, longer-term study might have better captured these students' stories in the long run. This thesis needs to be understood as a snapshot of a much longer process. It is another question as to whether any of the playful ideas I have encountered and encouraged become reified in student practice without being stultified, and whether the green-shoots of empowerment are able to grow sustainably.

The final limitation comes out of the roots of the thesis. I began this argument inspired by policy that does not discuss participation in a meaningful way, and have found that it is productive to consider participation as part of the design of pedagogy. The argument sits, then, somewhere between policy and pedagogy, but certainly has more to say about the latter than the former. At the very start, policy left gaps to be filled in at a local level, and I have found potential for play in these gaps via reflective practice. It is important to note that this freedom at a local level is key to developing play. Had policy indicated the specific way in which foundation years are supposed to work I would not have had this leeway. British universities are not as regulated as other education providers, which makes them ideal spaces for trying ideas like these out. The point at which research starts to critique policy is a productive one because it involves pushing at the boundaries of what is considered 'doable' within the university, but it is also dependent on these sorts of spaces already existing. My conclusions, then, are more about pedagogy than policy and cannot be used to rewrite policy around widening participation from the ground up. Instead, I hope they inspire further pedagogical work that will continue to question whether the conceptions of participation that we come across in policy are enough. Again, this seems confined to the local, personal level.

Of course, the other side of the pragmatist argument would be that any theoretical contribution to the field is only as worthwhile as the change that it actually enacts in peoples' experiences. Given this, I want to spend some time discussing the potential impact of this thesis for me as an educational researcher at the start of my career. In doing so I think about the 'what if?' that comes after the 'so what?' of my conclusions.

### **9.3 New Game +**

There is clearly more work to be done to connect play and participation in practical terms. Having developed my understanding of Total Play too late in the year for it to have a real

influence over my practice, at the very least my next step should be to consider these ways I might put it into practice in the future. This suggests that my next project needs to be similarly embedded in practice (although I would argue that my Deweyan epistemology necessitates this anyway).

The simplest next step would be to return to the influence of design-based research on the project and repeat the experiment of incorporating play into the curriculum. It should be possible to focus on a different cohort, perhaps of more 'traditional' students, in order to extricate the particular effects that the foundation year itself had on the way in which play worked. I have already discussed that the focus on pastoral care and personal reflective tasks may have provided a particularly nurturing environment for playful approaches. The same could be said for any of the smaller scale activities that I incorporated into teaching over the course of the year. Would these have had the same effect if they were not part of a much bigger playful experience, and could they be extracted and used in the same way? Perhaps the next step is to try to answer some of these questions.

Such an approach, though, faces difficulties when I am the researcher approaching it. The story of my year has been one of engaging in educational research, but also one of critiquing and transforming my own values and practice. Beyond my belief in the power of play and games, this project has renewed my belief in more fundamental democratic values and how these are enacted in university education. If I was to revisit some of the same techniques and approaches, even in a different context, it would be difficult to do so without acknowledging that my own values around play and participation have shifted. Any repeat of the experiment would not be 'pure' because of this. As Chapter 7 showed, the process of research was entangled with everything else that was happening, but, although it complicated the process, this entanglement was what produced many of the more positive outcomes.

Given this, it is more honest not to repeat for the sake of an unachievable reliability but instead take the spirit of the research project in new directions. For example, Total Play's democratic and participatory aspects suggest that educators need to involve students more directly in their research activities and build curriculum opportunities around 'live' research. Though I made some moves towards this in my work with more involved students, this is effectively a potential project in its own right, whether or not it involves play.

I can also see that, although play and research were connected via playful teaching, and some of the playful activities worked their way into my focus group sessions, there is more work to be done on the connection between play and participation in research. More participatory ways of sharing research might involve designing games that move beyond helping with data collection and towards communicating the ideas behind research. I return to my use of game metaphors to explain difficult theoretical concepts (especially my use of *Mysterium* in Chapter 4). If these metaphors are so powerful, then actually experiencing the game in question can bring new ways of thinking for those playing it. There is a space for researchers to design games from the ground up to communicate their research, especially when the output of this research is not a set of concrete findings but rather a more nuanced idea of experience.

There is a concept in videogames called a 'New Game +' which was popularised by the game *Chrono Trigger* (Square, 1995) and is now a common feature of modern open-world role-playing games. After completing the game, players can begin a 'New Game +' to restart the game's story without resetting all of the powers and abilities that they have developed over the course of playing. Their character is now fully powered-up from the start of the game, and they are better able to face the challenges that the game throws at them (though 'New Game +' also often comes with increased difficulty to balance this). This is continued play based on the idea that the player-character has new skills, but also on the

idea that they player themselves has developed a level of literacy with the game that early challenges are no longer challenging.

In a way, whatever I do to follow up on this research will be a 'New Game +'. I cannot un-have the experiences I have had, and subsequently cannot unlearn and return to the same conditions. What I can do is build upon what I have, and where I encounter similar (or more 'difficult') situations, use these new skills and values in ways that contribute to a wider conversation about concepts like play and participation.

In the spirit of contributing to this conversation, but given my reluctance to provide a definitive model or any guarantees of 'what works', I will close with a way to continue the conversation at least. Figure 9B shows formalisations of the sorts of questions that I asked myself throughout the process of writing this thesis, and that I intend to keep asking myself as my career moves on. Each question is focused on a theme from this thesis. Building on the metaphor of the 'New Game +' I present them in 'levels'; the idea being that as practitioners move closer to a realisation of Total Play, they effectively 'level up' their prior understandings and experiences. The top 'level' will hopefully inspire something that approaches Total Play in its scope, as it involves students and educators engaging collectively in a 'total' activity in which they take on different roles and redefine both success and the rules they follow to reach this.

I have argued that participation in one magic circle will always affect participation in adjacent magic circles, and in a way this research project is adjacent to many others. My own readings (and therefore experiences) of past research are changed by my current ideas, and similarly this project lays a foundation for future research, even if this goes in a completely different direction. Having uncovered many new ideas through my experiences, I am now in a position to feed those ideas back into experience and thereby create new experiences for myself and others. I am a safer pair of hands than I was when I started, but this inevitably brings with it further existing practice to critique as part of analysis.



<b>Theme</b>	<b>Level 1</b>	<b>Level 2</b>	<b>Level 3</b>
<i>Play</i>	Where is there space to be playful in this activity?	Where is there space to be playful in this course?	Where is there space to be playful in this university?
<i>Playstyles</i>	How do students use different playstyles?	Are there opportunities for students to learn by using multiple playstyles?	How do students understand their own ability to switch playstyles?
<i>Position-switching</i>	Can students learn from each other?	Where are there opportunities for students to play the role of expert?	How do I switch positions with my students?
<i>Totalness</i>	What do students bring with them from the outside world?	What do students learn from engagement with the outside world?	How does the work we are doing together blur the boundaries between the university and the outside world?
<i>Democracy</i>	Where do students have a choice?	How do students participate in the design and delivery of learning?	How does our lead to more democratic outcomes beyond the university?
<i>Teacher/Researcher</i>	How do I combine the roles of teacher and researcher?	How does research transform my practice, and vice versa?	How can I play with the overlap between teacher and researcher?
<i>Success</i>	Are there other ways of succeeding at this activity?	How do students define success for themselves?	What does collective success mean for us as a group...?
<i>Inefficiency</i>	Are students able to learn from failure?	Do students take pride in the process as well as the product...?	...and does it matter if we achieve it or not?

Figure 9B: Levels of questions towards Total Play

#### 9.4 Final thought: A game of backgammon

‘And with that, I switched from distracting myself from thesis writing with horrifying news to distracting myself from horrifying news with thesis writing.’

My tweet, 9:17am, 12<sup>th</sup> December 2018

I started this project in September 2016, so my reading, teaching, fieldwork and writing has taken place against the constant background noise of the election of Donald Trump, the breakdown of the UK over Brexit, and increasingly alarming predictions over climate change and nuclear war. It is no surprise, then that my sentiment from the tweet above was a common thought, especially as I started writing up. My research, as much as it was an effort to understand the world, also offered an escape because it allowed me to concentrate on something more positive, meaningful and explicable than the chaos happening beyond the walls of my office.

At the very least, participation in play, research and education encourages the creation of magic circles which are set aside from the real world as much as they are embedded in its mess, and this can sometimes be a useful distinction. David Hume contrasts a ‘game of backgammon’ with his thoughts on fundamental epistemological truths, which have existentially troubling implications for the self:

Where am I, or what? From what causes do I derive my existence, and to what condition shall I return? ... I am confounded with all these questions, and begin to fancy myself in the most deplorable condition imaginable, environed with the deepest darkness, and utterly deprived of the use of every member and faculty.

Most fortunately it happens, that since Reason is incapable of dispelling these clouds, Nature herself suffices to that purpose, and cures me of this philosophical melancholy and delirium, either by relaxing this bent of mind, or by some avocation, and lively impression of my senses, which obliterate all these chimeras. I dine, I play a game of backgammon, I converse, and am merry with my friends. And when, after three or four hours' amusement, I would return to these

speculations, they appear so cold, and strained, and ridiculous, that I cannot find in my heart to enter into them any farther. (Hume, 1739: 316)

Hume retreats into 'amusement' with friends in order to remind himself that many of these truths are cold in comparison to lived experience, even if they are philosophically necessary. Similarly, I have started to consider some big, difficult problems that may never be solved in my lifetime, especially those related to the political implications of Total Play in a world that feels more neoliberal than ever.

I have criticised the position that games are frivolous, or unrelated to the 'real world'. However, I am also aware that, according to my own ways of understanding of how people play, games really *are* an escape for people. This is part of what makes the magic circle 'magic'. Similarly, my 'real world' research was, in part, an escape from reality because it focused on a very specific aspect of social reality that I was able to have some optimism about. As much as a PhD is supposed to be hard work, I really enjoyed it. I needed the PhD as a distraction from wider reality, just as much as I needed games as a distraction from writing.

Games are the real world, and so is university, and so is research. Our everyday understanding of the structure of things, though, can often mean that it is difficult to reconcile the different experiences that we have in these particular practices. If the past three years has taught me anything, it is that it is only through critically examining what participation really involves that we can see the links, and begin to change our participation through thinking differently. When all of this becomes overwhelming, a game of backgammon might provide a few hours of relief from the world, but it might provide new and exciting ways of thinking about it too.

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## Appendix: Overview of Foundations of Academic Practice

Figure 10A summarises all of the activities that my students and I were directly involved in over the course of the 2017-18.

w/c	FoAP Session	Playful Journal Task	Interview Activities	Other Activities
18 <sup>th</sup> Sept	Introduction to FoAP			
25 <sup>th</sup> Sept	Introduction to Playful Research	Talk to someone new in a lecture <u>or</u> Discuss something that you have learned with your family.		
2 <sup>nd</sup> Oct	Study Skills Overview			
9 <sup>th</sup> Oct	Playful Research: Investigate	Pick a book from one of your reading lists and read three pages at random. What do you learn?		
16 <sup>th</sup> Oct	Library Overview			
23 <sup>rd</sup> Oct	Mid-Unit Review		Interview 23 <sup>rd</sup>	
Reading Week				
6 <sup>th</sup> Nov	Playful Research: Create	Make a frame - this can be a piece of paper, a Lego model or even your fingers. Use your frame to look at the world. Draw/write/sketch/describe this for your research journal.		
13 <sup>th</sup> Nov	Assessment Focus: Reflection			
20 <sup>th</sup> Nov	Playful Research: Collaborate	Take a set of selfies (one per person) that are as far away from each other as possible. Draw a map of where your pictures were taken and explain how you coordinated this. <u>or</u> Write a collaborative children's' story with someone else. One of you start the story, then pass it on for the next part, and so on...	Interview 22 <sup>nd</sup>  2 x Interview 23 <sup>rd</sup>	
27 <sup>th</sup> Nov	Active Listening and Group Work			



4 <sup>th</sup> Dec	Playful Research: Explore	Write down 50 things about: A trip to the supermarket, a walk in your neighbourhood or a trip to the library.		
11 <sup>th</sup> Dec	Reflective Reading		Interview 14 <sup>th</sup>	
Christmas Break				
8 <sup>th</sup> Jan	Creative Writing for Journals	Take a picture that shows as many reflections as possible.		
15 <sup>th</sup> Jan	Referencing and Reading Skills			
22 <sup>nd</sup> Jan	Writing Skills		Interview 25 <sup>th</sup>	
29 <sup>th</sup> Jan	Presentation Skills	Try to deliberately alter your style of address a couple of times in the next week. Talk to your friends more formally, or try out some facilitation skills in a lecture or workshop.		
5 <sup>th</sup> Feb	Critical Thinking		Interview 7 <sup>th</sup>	EdLab Game Project
12 <sup>th</sup> Feb	Writing in Different Voices	Write reflectively on this session in a different voice  <u>or</u> Take an envelope and open it on Monday.		EdLab Games Project
Reading Week				
26 <sup>th</sup> Feb	Visual Presentation Skills			EdLab Games Project
5 <sup>th</sup> Mar	Networking and Presenting Yourself	Write a creative response to one of these job interview questions in your journal.	Interview 8 <sup>th</sup>	
12 <sup>th</sup> Mar	Critical Thinking			
19 <sup>th</sup> Mar	Creative Documentation	Write a new set of instructions to explain an everyday task to an alien.	Interview 22 <sup>nd</sup>	
Easter Break				
16 <sup>th</sup> Apr	Presentation Skills: Planning and Documentation		Interview 17 <sup>th</sup>	

23 <sup>rd</sup> Apr	Assessment Workshop		Reflective Writing Session 25 <sup>th</sup>	EdLab Assessment Workshop
30 <sup>th</sup> Apr	Assessment Workshop			EdLab Assessment Workshop
7 <sup>th</sup> May	Assessment Workshop			EdLab Assessment Workshop

*Figure 10A: A Timeline of the Foundation Year, 2017-18*